



Thursday, March 27, 2014

25th of Adar II, 5774

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Candle lighting: 7:22pm on Friday, 28 Mar 2014

This week's Torah portion is Parashat Tazria

Shabbat HaChgdesh occurs on Saturday, 29 Mar 2014

Havdalah (45 min): 8:26pm on Saturday, 29 Mar 2014

Shabbat times for Montreal

Please stop dumbing down Israel's realities

Sunday, August 5, 2012

Tags: Columnists

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Gerald Steinberg

Israel is an incredibly difficult country to understand – historically, politically, religiously, socially, geographically and in every other way. What we lack in physical space, we make up for by layers of complexity deposited over almost 4,000 years, through cycles of destruction and restoration, including the Zionist miracle.

While Israelis live with and debate this complex reality every day, many pundits and Jewish advice-givers simplify our difficult situation into a few sound bites followed by very simplistic and unrealistic solutions. They also apply analogies taken from other places

and contexts, (such as the American civil rights movement and South African apartheid) and try to force-fit them to Israel's unique situation.

But there is no other case of a people exiled from its homeland in ancient times, dispersed to the four corners of the earth while maintaining its identity and coherence, and then returning to re-establish a sovereign modern nation as its neighbours try to wipe it out.

For example, when I hear or read Tom Friedman, the New York Times columnist, and Peter Beinart, another U.S.-based Jewish journalist, I'm struck by the confidence with which they present their solutions, as seen from half a world away.

Beinart, the author of The Crisis of Zionism, is a particularly harsh critic whose influence is reflected in columns in the New York Times and as a speaker in many Jewish community events.

In his book, Beinart, like others only more so, describes the settlements that began after the 1967 war as the source of the "crisis," and fervently believes that Israel alone has the power to bring peace by ending the "occupation." For him, the West Bank is not part of a disputed homeland (Judea and Samaria), or a base for mass terror if the peace process goes bad again, but "a territory where Jewish power runs wild."

Beinart couches his argument in the idealistic language of human rights, harshly attacking Israelis and American Jewish leaders for ignoring "accounts of Palestinian suffering." In this patronizing vision, Palestinians are portrayed as passive victims, incapable of moral judgment or reaching an equitable agreement with Israel. To buttress his arguments, he quotes from political NGOs whose credibility is problematic, at best.

Many complications, such as the 1948 Arab invasion, then-Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser's 1967 threat to "drive the Jews into the sea," the "three nos" of the Arab League in Khartoum, numerous Israeli peace proposals that were rejected, the refugee myths, and daily incitement are glossed over as, at best, footnotes of no significance. Instead, on behalf of the "younger Americans" and Jewish students who are Beinart's primary target audience, the reference point is that for "44 years, twice a college student's life span, they have seen Israel control territory in which millions of Palestinians lack citizenship."

These easy-to-digest versions of Israel's situation and history aren't the exception. They're the norm for many journalists and academics, a large number of them Jewish. In this manner, the complex issues related to the

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20 per cent Israeli-Arab minority are reduced to entirely misleading concepts such as "discrimination" and "racism," and ignore the central impact of the wider Arab-Israel conflict. The clearly stated and repeated calls by many Israeli Arab leaders for the replacement of Israel with a so-called "state of all its citizens," which would mark the end of Zionism, are also missing from the easy-reader versions of history.

The dumbing down of Israel's complex realities extends to the treatment of efforts to create a somewhat unified Jewish framework in a society composed of dozens of groups with their own traditions and sense of right and wrong. It's far too easy for Diaspora Jews, whose understanding of these issues is limited, to criticize Israel for not being like them and continuing to grapple with issues such as the role of rabbis in politics, or army exemptions granted 64 years ago to 400 yeshiva students that have expanded to more than 100,000.

It's one thing to engage with Israel, including offering constructive criticism, but first, a little humility and some more complexity, please.

Young Jews, particularly in North America, shouldn't be deprived of the right to learn about Israeli realities beyond the sound bites and simplistic formulae.

This column appears in the August 9 print issue of The CJN

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