

Ludwig Watzal

In memoriam Israel Shahak



Israel Shahak passed away on July 2, 2001 at the age of 68. Born in Warsaw on April 28, 1933 he survived the Nazi atrocities in the Warsaw ghetto and Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. In 1945 he emigrated to Palestine at the time of the British Mandate (now Israel). He was a humanist, a live-long human rights activist. For many years he was chairman of the Israeli Human Rights League and consistently criticized Zionism, Israel's policy towards the Palestinians, the reactionary elements in Jewish religion, and Jewish fundamentalism.

For Felicia Langer, the Israeli-German human rights lawyer, Shahak was a "Yeseyahu Leibowitz only without religion". Both persons can be regarded as Israel's last prophets. Ms. Langer, Vice President under Shahak's chairmanship of the Israeli Human Rights League, said in an interview with me that Shahak was the „most courageous intellectual, a very close friend with deep insights in the situation than many others. Although he specialised in biochemistry, he was an avid reader. He loved literature. He was devoid of prejudices."

Shahak was a person with strong convictions. He rejected the Israeli-centered remembrance of the Holocaust; for him the remembrance should be universal. Consequently, he opposed racism, oppression, and any form of discrimination. Until his death, he criticised Israeli treatment not only of its own Palestinian citizens but also of the inhumane treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories.

Israel Shahak's perception of Israel and its political make-up is well documented in his books „Jewish History, Jewish Religion“, „Open Secrets“, and „Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel“ (all published by Pluto Press), the latter written with Norton Mezvinsky. In these books he unfolds a picture of Israel that is unfamiliar in the West, especially in the United States of America. Shahak was also famous for his so-called „Shahak papers“, which contained translations from the Hebrew press.

I met Israel Shahak for the first time at the end of 1997 in Jerusalem. We kept in touch until his death. When his book „Jewish History, Jewish Religion“ was supposed to be published by a dubious German publisher, I warned him not to go ahead. His answer was: „I don't care (who is publishing my book), the main point is, that it is published in German.“ The Book was ignored in Germany. Luckily, it was republished last year (2009) by the Melzer Publications in their series „Edition Semit“.

I conducted the following interview with Israel Shahak in English shortly before the State of Israel turned 50. It was partly published in German in the Austrian journal „International“ under the title: „Arafat ist ein Diktator“ (Arafat is a dictator). At that time, Binyamin Netanyahu was, like now, Israel's Prime Minister. What Shahak said 13 years ago could have been said yesterday. In remembrance of the ninth anniversary of Shahak's death, I decided to publish the whole interview in English in order to make it available to a global audience.

Ludwig Watzal: Professor Shahak, you belong to the very few people in Israel who have levelled a radical critique of their own country, of Palestinians and especially of Yassir Arafat. What are the reasons for it?

Israel Shahak: Yes, I will explain, but before doing so, let me say that yesterday I attended a meeting of about 800 left-leaning intellectuals in Tel Aviv. All of them were critical of my country and the majority of them, I would say 600, were critical of Arafat. You see, I am not alone. The reason for my critique is very simple. Regarding my country, I think that Zionism is a form of racism. For many years I have been claiming that it is a mirror image of anti-Semitism. While any anti-Semitism is based on denying the humanity and dignity of Jews, Zionism is grounded on discrimination and of fostering hatred and suspicion towards all non-Jews. This

suspicion is not directed at Arabs for being Arabs but rather at non-Jews, Arab and non-Arab, and no one who reads the Hebrew media can, in my opinion, escape from this conclusion. As regards Arafat, he is a dictator. Arafat is a stooge in the hands of Israel and the United States, whose role is to ensure stability in the Palestinian street, to maintain Palestinians passive while they are being exploited and oppressed.

In your publications you have always been very critical of the Zionist ideology. Is it only because of its racist aspects or did other elements lead you to oppose it?

I always start with a Jewish critique of Zionism, which I consider more important. I must say, than the harm done unto the Palestinians. Zionism should be criticised even the Jewish state had been established on a desert island without harming anybody. The reason is that a state based on the concept of religious, racial or national purity, should be criticised. The aim of Zionism, as Zionists themselves said, and believe me, I have read all the founding fathers of Zionism, was to establish a purely Jewish state. This aim was defended with particular zeal by labour (left) Zionists. Now, I think that a state should be open. I say that a state which did not harm anybody should receive a certain number, increasing number of strangers, of people who are persecuted and who are oppressed who seek asylum and so on. Israel should not be purely Jewish and should accept non-Jewish immigrants.

Do you think that Zionism achieved its goal to establish a normal nation state for the Jewish people?

Yes and no. I think that it has reached its goal to establish a state for Israeli Jews but in the process Israeli Jews differed from other Jews. I think that Israeli Jews are by now a nation of its own. When Israeli Jews immigrate to the United States - as half a million of them already did - they keep themselves apart of the American Jewish community. In fact, they like feel more affinity towards non-Jewish Americans than towards the American Jews. Similarly, they demand from Jews who immigrate to Israel to become Israelis, i. e. to adopt Israeli customs. Those who fail to do so are resented in a slightly xenophobic attitude that you find in Germany. Say, towards Germans coming from abroad. I think the Zionist project has succeeded but by irony of history it has created something else, not a Jewish state but an Israeli Jewish state.

Are you satisfied with your present government? What do you like and what do you dislike?

I am never satisfied with any government. First, I believe that the attitude to all governments would be that they are the lesser evil, meaning no government is good, but we can have a government which is not so bad as others. Secondly, I cannot be satisfied with any Zionist government because I consider them all as discriminatory. Having said this, the present government is in my view not as bad as the government of Rabin and Peres. The reason is that it is a right-wing government. This means that it is treated with distrust by the entire world and by half of the Israeli people who watch it carefully. In fact it steals less Palestinian land than the government of Rabin and Peres. The Labour government was able to confiscate any amount of Palestinian land and claim it is for the sake of peace. Sadly this claim was largely believed. The great point in Netanyahu's favor is that no one will believe anything he is going to say. He therefore can rob and inflict much less harm than the previous government. This is the main point in his favour. Another point in his favour is that Likud made peace with Egypt and gave all of Sinai back. Although Likud invaded Lebanon, peace with Egypt is in my opinion more important. Many more people were killed in our wars with Egypt than in our invasion of Lebanon. And the democratisation of Israeli society for both Arabs and Jews took greater strides under Likud than under Labour. I will give you only one example. You must have heard about the "Land's day", celebrated by Israeli Arabs. Rabin confiscated a lot of land. One of Begin's first legislative acts was to put an end to the confiscation of land owned by Israeli Arabs and only permit such confiscation in the occupied territories. Under the principle of lesser evil this is good.

Is the present government not dominated by religious people?

I am disappointed about the general increase in the power of religious parties. I am very much afraid of one particular party among them, namely the National Religious Party (NRP=Mafdal L.W.) which I consider different and worse than the Shas or the small Ashkenasi orthodox party. I am very much afraid about the particular parties. Under Labour it would be the same. This religious trend that I very much oppose and very much fear which exist anyhow.

Why are you so afraid of the Mafdal-Party?

Because it is a messianic party, i. e. it promotes the idea that we are in the time of redemption. The world is changing and Messiah and God will immediately appear. Therefore, we do have to do acts which are justified in their view by the hope that God will intervene in our favour. As the German saying goes: "Gott mit uns". The crusaders, too, said "God (is) with us". This is a most dangerous slogan because it can justify everything. Mafdal is the only party in which members propose establishing of a religious state in which Talmudic laws will replace secular law. In addition, a strong and growing constituency in this party is pushing for building the Third Temple. This would require the destruction of the al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. It would lead to a conflict with the entire Islamic world, a conflict of global dimensions. My "fight" with the two other religious parties is similar to that with the secular parties. I must add that I don't share the leftist Israeli incitement against the religious party Shas. Although I oppose Shas on many aspects, Shas is nevertheless an ordinary Israeli party playing within a system of give and take. You will not find Shas people (pestering and intimidating Palestinians) in Hebron. The most fanatic Jews who live inside Hebron are members of the National Religious Party.

You have been criticising the Jewish religion, especially after the massacre committed by Baruch Goldstein in Hebron. You argued that this deed could not be understood without taking religion into consideration. Could you explain?

I am criticising the Jewish religion before I criticise Zionism. But after the murder of Rabin by Yigal Amir it is clear. If you examine the extreme policies of the state of Israel you will find that they can only be carried by religious Jews of messianic variety. Neither secular people nor members of Shas will agree with those policies, or least to the extent to carrying them out. If you don't treat the settlements as one unity, and this against my principles, even in a thing which is evil you have still to divide it to two categories and to see what is better what is worse. Among the settlements there are several in the middle of Hebron settlement Nezarim in the Gaza Strip where 120 Jewish settlers live along hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. Obviously, these settlements can not be treated in the same way as many other settlements. You will find that the extremist settlement (those established as provocations) are only religious. No secular Jew will live in these settlements. This shows the extreme fanaticism of those people. They will literally disregard even realism for their evil settling purposes.

Is there a link between the Jewish religion and a kind of latent racism against Gojim (non-Jews) in Israel?

Not latent. The racism here in Israel where we Jews are a majority is part of everyday life. The hatred is directed against foreign workers. The reasons for the hatred of non-Arabs and Gentiles (Gojim) are expressed openly because the foreigners are small communities and Israel is not afraid of war with Romania or the Philippines. Government ministers, media workers and religious leaders (rabbis) are on record saying that we don't want Romanians here because our daughters may fall in love with a Romanian and marry him. You are surely familiar with this kind of racist argument in your country. It is pure hatred for its own sake. It is quite clear here that most of the Jews hate Gentiles and the more they are influenced by religion, the greater the hatred.

There is also a connection between the degree of hatred and religion.

Obviously, there is not only a connection: it emanates from the Jewish religion. In my book "Jewish History, Jewish Religion" I show that if these laws were obeyed and internalised for hundreds of years they must be a source of hatred. Jews are justified in saying that Catholic laws and holy writings are a source of hatred against Jews. I agree that they are a source of hatred, but Jewish laws and legends much worse in my opinion must be a source of hatred.

Were you surprised that a religious Jew killed Rabin?

I predicted it. I was of the two people who predicted that a religious Jew will not assassinate but will try to assassinate Rabin. The other was Yehosohavat Harkabi, the former chief of military intelligence. I will make to you also another prediction, namely that there will be an attempt by a religious Jew to try to assassinate Netanyahu (Here Prof. Shahak erred L.W.).

I always thought that Rabin was a very good Prime Minister for the settlers. He was the personification of security per se. He did not want to dismantle settlements after the Goldstein massacre in Hebron. What's your opinion on that?

He was more interested in symbols than reality. Everything you said is true but he also used to continuously insult the settlers. He used to say to them: you are not crucial for security. He used to say that if it's necessary to make peace, he will accept that a Jew will require a visa to go to Gush Etzion, which is an important group of settlements near Jerusalem. The first thing I emphasised to you about messianic Jews is that they are not as much interested in reality as in redemption. Yigal Amir and people like him do not appreciate the fact that the Oslo agreement is actually the greatest Zionist victory after 1948/49. They are outraged by the mere sight of a Palestinian flag, a symbol, being flown on the Holy Land. They think in religious terms. Let me give you a Christian-Muslim example: It would have been very convenient centuries ago, when trade relations flourished between Italian cities and Islamic countries, say Venice for example, that a mosque be built in Venice or Rome for Muslim traders. Yet no mosque was built until 20th century. Similarly, Saudis still stick to the principle that no Christian church be built on Saudi territory. You see, symbols are not only important to Jews.

Do you fear the rise of Jewish fundamentalism in Israel? Do you think that this kind of fundamentalism could endanger Israel's security in the long run?

The answer is yes. There are two possible scenarios: The first is a civil war. A civil war is possible at any point, especially if there are no outside threats. But even without outside threats I think that civil war with Messianics is quite possible. The second scenario is even worse and it's being debated in the Hebrew press for over a year. It is the scenario of a religious putsch. I must mention here that the number of Messianics within the armed forces, including officers and soldiers, is increasing rapidly because the Messianics, not other religious Jews, are the strongest militarist people in Israel. They educate their children for dedicated army service beyond the three obligatory years. They operate military-religious colleges in which people are formed from the beginning to serve as officers or soldiers in elite units. The percentage of Messianic trainees approaching 30 per cent in a given officer course. They are excellent soldiers, very dedicated from a military point of view. The army favours them. They may be tempted to undertake a military putsch which, from their ideological point of view, is becoming more and more accepted as a possibility.

Have they already reached the higher ranks of the officer corps?

In their ranks you don't have yet a general. Admittedly. But the history proves military putsches can also be undertaken by majors and colonels. You don't need a general.

Does the present Israeli government undertake anything to stop the influx of national religious Jews into the army?

No. But we have an movement headed by retired officers from medium ranks to establish parallel. secular colleges for pre-military training in which secular youth will be given military training to counterbalance the influx of religious conscripts.

Do you think the secular part of Israeli society is strong enough to resist the influence of the national religious people?

At the moment, yes. But I cannot vouch what will happen in eight or ten years.

In which way did the Israeli society deal with this religious right-wing phenomenon after the killing of Rabin?

They did not deal at all with this phenomenon. This is one of the greatest treasonous acts in Israeli history. They attributed the murder till this very day to the right-wing as they defined it, that is anyone beyond the right wing of the Labour party, especially to Likud, to Netanyahu. They don't focus on the group that actually educated Yigal Amir (Rabin's murderer L.W.), namely the National Religious Party. It was not Likud that calls for the killing of the Prime Minister, but religious groups. So by spreading the blame, Labour increased substantially the danger. In this you have a very good German parallel, namely the behaviour of the Communist Party before the rise of Nazism in 1933. Instead to concentrate on Nazism, they fought the Social Democrats. The Israeli right-wing as a whole is not to blame for Rabin's assassination but the national messianic education and the National Religious Party is.

You belong to the most severe critics of Zionism. So then, do you like the so-called post-Zionists?

No. I am anti-Zionist pure and simple.

Aren't the post-Zionists also anti-Zionists?

It is a vage movement. I am saying that even the first Zionist were also members of an evil movement because they actually bought land in Palestine with the intention that it will belongs only to Jews. They actually proclaimed at the very beginning of the 20th century the principle of purely Jewish labour, requiring Jewish employers to hire only Jews and no others. This is plain racism to me.

Don't the post-Zionist call Zionist historical myths into question?

This is true also about Zionism. We have a very positive movement of the "New Historians" who question the entire discourse on Jewish history, not only the last hundred years. This is a common phenomenon to great part of Israeli society and not limited to post-Zionism. There a very much dedicated Zionists who do the same. Benny Morris for example is a dedicated Zionist who wrote books which changed history of certain periods.

According to Moshe Zimmermann, Professor of European History at the Hebrew University, classical Zionism came to an end with the assassination of Rabin and the original enemies of classical Zionism, the ethnocentric version of Zionism, took over, and these are the real post-Zionists. What do you think of his thesis?

This is news for me. He must have argued it in German and not in Hebrew. Now that I hear it from you, I disagree with it. I think classical Zionism is continuing. It has strong Jewish enemies, namely the non-messianic religious parties. One of my points in favour of Shas against national religious parties is that Shas says openly "we are opposing Zionism" because Zionism is contrary to Jewish religion in its original form. They are very firm in their opposition to Zionism. Their position is used to slander and to attack them.

Let us switch to the German-Israeli relationship. Should this kind of relationship be normal like the relationship between France and Israel or is there something special to it?

There is nothing special to it, except for those who are Holocaust survivors. For them, the relations will not be special but maybe individual. I know people who dislike German culture. I not only like it but know it quite well. Between the two states, the relationship should be normal because Nazism is fundamentally not an anti-Jewish but universal and human phenomenon. The number of human beings, including Germans, who were killed because the Nazis were in power, is far greater than the number of killed Jews. Nazism can happen everywhere and anywhere including if Messianics will rule Israel. So the best way to prevent the recurrence of Nazism in any place on earth is to have normal relations with Germany.

How far in depth, should the Holocaust keep on influencing our bilateral relationship?

The memory of the Holocaust must be kept but it is a universal memory. Actually Israeli Jewish memories of Holocaust are centred on Poland. When they want to commemorate the Holocaust most Jews go to Poland simply because out of the six million Jews who were killed three million were Polish Jews and also others were brought to Poland to be killed.

What do you think of the German debate on building a holocaust monument?

If people want to built it, they should built it. Monuments are not important, nor are flags. Symbols are not important. To worship of symbols is the first step in becoming fanatical. It's not an important question. The important matter for me is to dissociate Nazism from being a specific German issue and from German past. Nazism is not either connected with the Jewish past. It is part of a new movement, which in fact rejects Christian Europe. I always will continue to quote the following difference: Whatever Christianity or Islam did to Judaism they respected two principles: the first is that a Jew who converts to Christianity or Islam is immediately a brother. He can became an archbishop. This is a completely different attitude from the attitude of Nazis who not only exterminated converted Jews but stipulated that a Jew cannot change. The second principle is that all the other forms anti-Semitism, except the modern one, who begun in late 19th century and from which Nazism emerged, did not strive for the extermination of Jews but for their discrimination.

In Germany, a person who is critical on Israeli politics can get into deep trouble. Is it legitimate to differentiate between the Holocaust on the one hand and the policy of the Israeli government towards the Palestinians on the other? In Germany, there are always tendencies to justify the oppression of the Palestinians by invoking Holocaust. Should this not be separated?

I believe, like my friend Noam Chomsky, in unlimited freedom of expression. States should not make laws against opinions, including those which I hate most. I think everything should be open to criticism and if you make one exception others will follow. It is totally legitimate to criticise Israel. Secondly, the Holocaust argument goes for me into a completely opposite direction. The Holocaust was possible only because the Germans did not know about the holocaust. Or as a matter of fact, not only the Germans but most of the world did not know the truth. The Nazis tried to hide the mass murder of mental patients and so on. The moment the Catholic and the Protestant clergy knew about the Holocaust, they protested and Hitler had to retreat on this point. It means that the greater defence against Nazism against all other atrocities is the right to know and the right to speak out. Our chief interest is not the commemoration of the Holocaust but the prevention of other Holocausts. You can prevent mass killings of people who are alive. Our best weapon against such dangers is to allow freedom of criticism about everything, including Israel.

Let us switch to the Oslo agreement. Do you think that this agreement could lead to a sovereign Palestinian state?

If you ask about how it will be called, yes, it may be called a Palestinian state in the way the Transkei was called a sovereign state of Transkei because among the benefits of the Netanyahu government is that he is more slavish to United States than any Israeli Prime Minister. When Bill Clinton will have re-emerged from his scandals and decide to put a pressure on Israel and demand that we will recognise something called a Palestinian state Netanyahu would be first to agree. If the president of the United States will give Netanyahu an order, the order will be obeyed. The president of the United States values Israel as a tool of America's policy much more that he values Palestinians or all the Arab countries put together. The reason is that Israel is strong and rich. Israel's GDP is 16,900 US-Dollars. It is even more than Greece, Portugal, and Spain. Israel has a very powerful military. In Israel, by law, a government can begin a war without permission of the Knesset (the Israeli parliament L. W.). Israel represent itself as guardian of stability in Middle East on behalf of the West. Can Arafat guarantee the stability of Middle East? What he can guarantee is the stability in his Palestinian enclaves. Obviously, an imperial power will consider Israel more valuable. Israel is extremely important for the geopolitical influence of the United States in the region. These two facts are more important than the Jewish or Israel lobby. It is very very improbable that America will put any real pressure on Israel. Whatever will be established by Arafat (in terms of a Palestinian state L.W), it will be a Transkei (a former South African Bantustan state L.W.).

Do you think that the US needs Israel for the enforcement of its imperial (hegemonic) goals in the Middle East?

Yes, because the Israeli army is prepared, if necessary, to invade Saudi Arabia in order to defend the Saudi royal family. The Israeli army would be the quickest to achieve this goal. We cannot expect either the American Congress or the German Bundestag (Lower House of German Parliament L.W.) to approve sending troops only to suppress an internal revolution in Saudi Arabia. The Gulf war was possible only because Saddam Hussein conquered a U. N. member state and did not form a puppet government after conquest. He just declared the annexation of Kuwait. He did not behave in the style of the Soviet Union or the United States when they invade other countries. Imagine that the Soviet Union in 1956 would have annexed Hungary. If an internal revolution threatening crucial imperial interest in Arab countries will break out, it's the Israeli army which will intervene.

Do you think that Arafat and his men are just a bunch of corrupt politicians living at the expense of their people?

Yes. Obviously, Arafat was not corrupt in 1965 and it can be debated when he actually became corrupt. I would put it from the time he ruled half of Lebanon in coalition with other powers. But what you said confirms to what he is now.

If this corruption and bad government continue, could it happen that there will be another popular uprising against Arafat? Or could the Palestinian people this time, together with the PNA, rise up against Israel?

I think that a popular uprising against Arafat will come. At the beginning, it will be a quasi chaotic uprising like the first Intifada. The intifada was not directed but it spread by simple imitation. I think that the same will happen to Arafat. Arafat's regime is much stronger and much more cleverer than our regime of secret services in the territories. It has modern intelligence equipment and computers it received from America. One thing that in my opinion prevents revolutions on a global scale is the use of the computers in intelligence. Arafat has installed a computer system that collects personal data from almost everybody. Such form of total control was unknown 30 years ago. After all, he is a Palestinian dictator. And his people, gangsters as they are, are Palestinian gangsters. They cannot be substituted even by Italian gangster from the United States. Our Shabak (Israel's national intelligence service L.W.) was not only evil but also incredibly stupid. They think they know all about Palestinians, whereas in fact, they really don't know. Arafat is a clever gangster. He knows his

own people very well and he knows also how to rule them. He is a despot; he is an oppressor, but he is a clever despot.

Next year, Israel will turn 50. What do you wish for your country?

A de-Zionisation, the removal of Apartheid and discrimination. For many years I have been saying that Israel is an Apartheid country that discriminates against non-Jews. The first thing I wish for Israel is that the official discrimination of all non-Jews cease. I am not a utopian. I mean legal discrimination and official oppression. I think that this would be good basis for a "cold peace" in the Middle East. I don't expect a "warm peace" in the region based on love. I wish for a "cold peace" like, let us say, exists between Greece and Macedonia. They don't like each other but they don't make war. The first condition for this peace is de-Zionisation of Israel. Otherwise, a succession of wars is inevitable. I am also in favour of reducing the gap between rich and poor. The gap between rich and poor in Israel proper is much greater than in Germany. The formal legal discrimination between groups of people reminds me of the causes that brought the Holocaust. The first step of the Nazis was not to exterminate or anything of that kind but firing all officials who were Jews or converted Jews. Until that moment, they were German or Prussian patriots.

As a German, I can not go along with your views about the Holocaust. For me, it was a unique crime against European Jewry. For German ears it's very provocative.

I am a moderate pessimist and I think that Ruanda, Cambodia, and Bosnia have shown that Holocaust can happen. It is only the existence of civilised imperial powers which prevent a Holocaust. If there will be no imperial power feeling responsible for the world, Holocaust is possible again.

Professor Shahak, Thank you very much for the interview.

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<http://between-the-lines-ludwig-watzal.blogspot.com/2010/07/in-memorial-israel-shahak.html>

And here:

http://www.australia.to/2010/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3806:in-memorial-israel-shahak&catid=73:oped&Itemid=235