

From Zionist to Post-Zionist

SEMIT-Interview with Avraham Burg, former President of the Jewish Agency

In your book “Hitler besiegen” you erected a memorial not only in honour of your father but also for your mother who lived in the seventh generation in Hebron. With this background, how come that you as a young politician did not join the “National Religious Party” (NRP), the party of your father?

My father was a family man and within the family not concerned with political matters. We had many things in common. He was very much interested in building bridges between observants and non-observants. At this stage we had a lot in common. However, there was one crucial, fundamental difference between us. He believed that the state of Israel has a religious redemptive dimension. I believed at that time and I still believe that any state may it be Israel, Germany or the United States, is just a tool, it is just an instrument in the hands of the people. A state should not have any religious burden or dimension of significance. He believed that the state of Israel was religiously speaking the dome of our redemption. I did not agree and until today, I still call for the separation between church and state.

As long as your father was party-chairman, it was a liberal-conservative religious party. How come that it got hijacked by religious zealots and was turned into a messianic settler party?

In general terms you can ask the same question about the entire Israeli situation. Israel after 1948 was basically socialist; today it is mainly capitalist; much more religious and right-wing. The religious and the political process are connected to each other. After the state was founded, the number one challenge was to save the body, which means, evolving from the holocaust, managing the emigration from Muslim countries and rescuing the very few people coming from the Soviet bloc. It was about saving the body of the individual Jew and building

the body of the state. It was my father’s generation, which saved the body. Then came the generation of their children, which is my generation or a bit older. They said saving the body is not enough. We have to save the spirit as well. They introduced the messianic school of thought into the NRP that came from deeply committed messianic elements which were always there but over all the years, they were minor and insignificant and all of a sudden, it gained momentum. The peak of their achievement was the Six-Days-War. In the eyes of many, it was a redemptive war, it was a miracle. No such victory ever happened. It was a kind of signal. In the following years, all of Israel was changed by conquering and settling the land. It was a top priority not only of their camp, but for Israel as a whole.

From the outside Israel seems as if it’s turning into a society ruled by right-wing extremists and religious fanatics, although it has still a large secular segment. It is like Little America. Is this impression correct and what about the role of the secular segment?

Your reading of Israel is quite accurate. The whole political scenery has turned to the right when in the past it had been centred left. It is now centred right. There is a crush of left ideology not only in Israel, but all over the world. The comparison with the United States is very interesting because America is a very, very religious and conservative entity. Especially after the last eight years of the George W. Bush’s administration. It was shameful for the world’s intelligence, but this is a problem of the Americans. It is very conservative, religious, and right-wing oriented. As for Israel, it is much more complicated because here the issues of right and left are not just about social and economic positions of right or left. They combine two more dimensions: one is the Palestinians; the other concerns the religious and non-reli-

gious elements in society. If you look to the right and you see anti-Arab notions like Lieberman’s, which resemble and remind you of the xenophobic trends of today’s Europe, there is no difference. It is anti-Arab, very capitalistic and neo-conservative in its economy and Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Barak represented it in exactly the same fashion, though including an increasing religious and traditional notion. So here, you have the formular.

Let’s turn to your book. Two years ago your book “Hitler besiegen” was published in Israel. For the first time a politician from the political elite and the establishment turned all the Israeli values upside down. You slaughtered all sacred Israeli cows. How was your book perceived? Did your book cause uproar? Did it involve any personal consequences for you? Did you loose political friends et cetera?

First as a humanist, a peace-activist and a vegetarian, I reject the verb “slaughtered”, O.K? Metaphorically, it was not as much about slaughtering but rather putting a very clear mirror in front of the eyes of society. The fact that so many argued regarding my personality rather than answering my arguments tells me so. It is very easy but also very human to kill the messenger rather than dealing with the message. Having said that, the launching of my book was very, very, very controversial and very polemic. People were surprised; they were shocked, they were angry at me. Others told me that they were very thankful to elaborate and to open the door and clear the air, but it was not easy. Now two years later after I analysed what happened to the book, it is seen differently from how it was perceived after the first attacks. Because then, it became immediately the target of the aggression of many. Time passed and the people saw that one after one my arguments and analyses are coming true. Politically, I don’t know whether I lost because I re-

signed from politics five years ago, but I do not really care. I am not running for any position, O.K.? It is less relevant for me.

But what happened to me, I can see if I can characterize the people I “lost”. I would say that they are secular, middle-class, well-off Israelis who say, ‘Avram come on, now that we have made it, that we are established, we are OK. Now you come with your troubling questions: Stop it immediately.’ They were very mad at me all these Mr. Israels so to say. But on the other hand there came many young people about to enter the military service and after their service young students and parents were coming to me. Three times a week I even see groups of younger people like these. They would like to talk to me, not that they agree with my answers but they say Avram you are the only person who allows questions in this place. I can say, for the first time in my life, that this is the first generation who is interested in the subject.

A year later, your book was published in the US. How did the American Jewry react?

The publishing abroad is a very interesting issue because the intellectual circles, which are writers, commentators and think tanks etc. are curious about it because I offer a new strategy to Israel. It is not only a new direction for us, it is a new direction for the entire West. The intellectual circles in France, Italy and the US received it fantastically. I have been twice in the Charly Rose TV-show. In France, the book was very well perceived. The Jewish establishment was silent, not a single word they said. Those who agreed with me said it loud. Those who disagreed with me did not engage in polemics because it is not an easy polemic. In such a case, silence is a typical attitude of the Jewish establishment.

Were there accusations against you like being a “self-hating Jew” or even an “anti-Semite” or any other of these thoughtless things?

Yes, but it is not serious. There is no content behind it. You say I am a bad guy, O.K! Do you have a good argument? I do not want to get engaged in this kind of thing, O.K!

Mr. Burg, Zionism was establish to resolve the severe antisemitism in Europe and to enable the Jewish people to get their own nation-state and to live the same life like people in any other nation in the world. Looking back 60 years, has the Zionist dream come true or has it develop into a nightmare for the Israelis?

I am not sure that your assumptions were the only ones. No doubt that Herzl was severely impacted by the Dreyfus-Affair and others. Antisemitism was the cause of all of his dynamics. There were other national voices like Ahad Ha’am who thought of not only to solve the problem of Anti-Semitism and the Jews of Europe but who wanted to go back to the promised land and initiate a national spiritual renaissance. I would say the following: 100 years later and 60 years since we have sovereignty, it is still too early to know. We speak about a Jewish civilisation which is 3500 years old; of these we were 2000 years in exile. You don’t take 60 years of sovereignty and believe that immediately it balances and compensates 2000 years of prosecution. I can say one thing for sure: As long as we don’t have peace in the Middle East either because of our enemies or because of us, we are as much responsible for missing opportunities as well as they are. As long we don’t have this peace and we have to confine ourselves behind high walls to defend ourselves, our relations with our neighbours will mainly be based on weapons rather than on mutual interests. We are in a very dialectic and painful situation; we copied the ghetto-mentality and the exile reality to the Middle East. The minute the Zionist revolution has succeeded would be the time when we lower the wall, put down the swords and make them into ploughs. This we have not yet achieved.

There are a many critics of the Zionist ideology who state that there can only be peace in the Middle East when Zionism will be abolished. Do you share this opinion?

It is a discussion that for me seems somehow obsolete. For me Zionism was the scaffolding, which was supposed to support the new building into which the Jewish people were moving from exile structures into sovereignty. Once 97 per-

cent of the Jews are outside of immediate threat for their lives because most of us are living in a democratic hemisphere and the fact that we have a solid sovereignty here means that these aims of Zionism were achieved. From now on we have Judaism. I am a human being and this is my family name, I am a Jew, this is my middle name, and I am an Israeli, this is my private name. In the Middle East this, however, has not happened because the state of Israel as is does not succeed to achieve peace with the Arab states and the Palestinian people around us. It has nothing to do with any ideology a lot however with mistrust and the inability to bring this peace about. I believe that if you say, abolishing Zionism means abolishing the state of Israel, I will say it is a bad recommendation. You cannot persuade the people to go. If you say, let’s try to persuade the state of Israel to do something about it, I would say, I agree.

To make it clear that this is not my position I just cited critics.

And I tell you what this something is: Between us and the Palestinians, what happened is, we both had a trauma. We had the holocaust and they had the 1948-trauma. Instead of denying it, and they deny our trauma as we deny their trauma, we both go through an Alpha type competition. You have a trauma. You say mine is bigger, he says his trauma is bigger. And I say it is about time for psycho politics before politics. I understand the Palestinian refugee issue, I understand my part into it and the part of the Arab states which exploited it etc. But nonetheless, I fully understand my responsibility and I want to do my utmost to help to overcome it and to strife for a better live. As we succeeded in building the beginning of something between Germany and us there is no reason why we can’t also do it between us and the Palestinians. They have to recognize that we had a trauma, therefore we have fears and concerns and they need to help us to overcome our fears and concerns. Only when we mutually enhance each other and empower each other will it be possible to do something about it.

Just before Israel turned 50, I conducted an interview with Israel Shahak. We

also touched the question of Zionism. He argued that Zionism had to be criticized even if it would have been established on an island not hurting anybody because Zionism wanted and established a state only for its Jewish inhabitants. He argued that there is a fundamental contradiction between Zionism and a democratic state. He said that you cannot have a democratic Jewish state, because Zionism established an ethnocentric entity, which can only be democratic for their Jewish inhabitants. Do you agree with his position?

There is a problem with the definition of a Jewish-democratic state because if it is Jewish it is less democratic, if it is democratic it cannot compromise for the Jewish component. My solution is a bit different: I think the definition of the state should not be a Jewish state but a state for the Jews, which puts the responsibility for the Jewishness of the state on the shoulders of the individuals and the communities etc. If the Jewish communities decide to leave Israel as it is, we are in a majority; it will have a kind of Jewish character. Members of the Jewish majority can decide to move away from here and not to live here. If Israel annexes the Westbank, Jews will lose their majority; it will not be a state with a dominant Jewish character. I do not want the state being an instrument for any religious preference whatsoever.

Do you consider yourself still a Zionist?

As I defined Zionism earlier, there is now doubt that Zionism to me is very important and a glorious chapter in the past of my nation. But we have to move on. Zionism happened, served its cause, we have sovereignty, but now we have to move on. In this sense, there is now doubt I am a post-Zionist.

In your book, you have been using the term Jewish people. I think you have read Shlomo Sand's book "The invention of the Jewish people". When you were writing your book, didn't you know what Shlomo Sand wrote?

First his book was published after mine. But I think that Shlomo's argument is not that there is now Jewish people. He says that the origins are differ-

ent and the reading of the history is different. He said that we were not exiled but moved away. Many converted and came from converted religions. But he does not argue with the fact that there is something like a Jewish people. In fact, the Jewish people are here. There is no doubt that we are a people defined by us as such and by others as such. As long as these definitions exist in the hearts and the bodies and in the souls of many, I have no problem with it. The only thing I am saying in my book and I confirm it time and again, I do not believe that the Jewish nation is a religious genetic nation only. I believe it is a way of life, a value system, and I believe therefore that the dimensions and the extent of the Jewish people are wider than the limited orthodox definition.

How come that you compared in your book the situation in Israel today with Germany during the Weimar Republik?

As anybody can imagine, it was not an easy comparison. Sometimes analogies are very dangerous because they are not hundred percent accurate with the argument you want to make. Everybody sticks to the one percent, which is not exact and they miss the whole thing. In writing, you need analogies because they illustrate and emphasize. I thought about our situation here. First, let's compare it to the first white pioneers in North America and I said it is not an antithesis. Then I thought about France in Algeria and again it is not an antithesis. And then I thought about the two most important books that influenced the future and the fate of modern Jewish people at the end of the 19th and during the 20th century, both written in German; it was Hitler's "Mein Kampf" and Herzl's "Altneuland". Both are important, outstanding and significant books, which changed my personal and my national fate. Why did it happen in Germany? What was there in Germany that produced these two books? And the more I thought about it, I realized that what happened in Germany between the Second Reich and the Weimarer Republik was actually a very fascinating competition between new spirits of liberalism, creativity, equality, modernity and the national trauma. Trauma competed against the

new spirit, against hope. Trauma and hope, trauma and hope, trauma and hope. And eventually in the thirties the trauma took over. And I say to my Israeli fellows and to my Israeli colleagues and peers this is where we have a competition between a trauma and hope. On the one hand, there is no doubt that we are a traumatised nation on the individual and the collective level. But on the other hand, there is an unbelievable eruption of the new spirit, of new values, creativity and innovation. They are extraordinary in this place. There is a competition. My argument is: Pay attention that this time, here, with us, trauma will not win again.

I think that you wrote this book not only for the Israelis but also for the Germans.

No doubt.

Do you think that both people are still traumatised on a different degree by the Shoah? Should both people just forget the holocaust and put it on the backburner and move on and deal with the future? Professor Yehuda Elkana proposed in an article on March 8th, 1988, in Haaretz that the Israelis should forget about the holocaust and get rid of the historical "Zachor" exhortation and should turn towards the future. Is your position a similar one?

He was once my teacher. He retold that there came two people out of Auschwitz: One who said, never again towards Jews; and one who said never again towards any human being. This was a very important teaching for me. I do not argue that we should forget. Not remembering is not an option. We have to remember. But when you remember, it does not mean that you have to live in the past. When you remember, you move on. We have good mechanisms for it. We are the people with memory, we do not forget our past, we still celebrate and commemorate the destruction of the temples and the exodus from Egypt; all of our history. At the same time, we are a very vibrant and forward moving people. Having said that, you are right that the book was actually written for both neighbours of the same ocean of suffering: Germany and Israel. Yes, we had different positions during the Second World

War but now, years after, both societies have to overcome them. The society of the victims and the society of the victimizers. My feelings tells me that Israel is much more advanced and ahead of Germany when it comes to moving forward. In Israel, the discussion is open etc. That means that we are already in the middle of a discourse. In Germany, it is much more complicated. The people in Germany discuss whether the book should be published or not. Should the public read it or not. They do not want to be perceived as being Anti-Israeli or Anti-Semitic. It took me many years to find a publisher, finally Campus publisher found me. It was not so easy with the rest of the world either. That's why I say, we still have a long way to go together. Israel alone, Germany alone, and Israel and Germany together.

Israel drew the conclusion from the holocaust: Never again to us. As I understood you in the book, you are for a universal approach: Never again anywhere?

Right, this is my commitment as a Jew. It is the higher call of your generation. Wherever there is a victim, I would like to march together: Jews and Germans together.

Should this also be a lesson for the Germans?

I believe so. And today in the world

arena Germany is very reluctant to act. I do not mean to act militarily; you have to see the real power of Germany, the industrial, economic, intellectual, the ethic power of Germany. It is not matched anywhere when it comes to charity and global responsibility. For its stand regarding anti-misery anti-genocide and crimes against humanity, Germany is not there. I think it is not there because it is still hesitant to go out to these places. And I believe that if and when we shall be able to walk together – yesterday's victims with the yesterday's victimiser – and say this is where we have been only 60, 70 or 80 years ago and we teach our lesson together in order to help prevent any kind of misery. This might become a panacea, an example of redemption.

How do you see the future of Israel? Can Israel survive as a Jewish state or only as a state of all its citizens?

This is for the future to decide. I am not a good futurologist. All depends on peace. Without peace Israel will not be able and should not be able to rely on its sword forever. If you need swords and we need swords for self-defence, that is fine. If you need swords, an army and military like any other nation in the world that is fine. But to rely on this only is not enough. Israel must be able to live and survive in a trustworthy environment of peace. Look what happened to the American Jewry. How prosperous they

are. And there is no Jewish military power there. Look what happened to the German Jewry up until the war. The influence, the impact, the presence, the creativity from everything from Freud, Einstein etc. Imagine we had this energy here in Israel? We don't use it for our and the region's improvement because we are so entangled in wars and survival. Therefore, I believe that peace is and should be the prime strategy of Israel. It will answer all the questions.

Does Israel not lack the spiritual dimension? You referred in your book to the concept of Ahad Ha'am. What do you mean with it?

There is no doubt about that. It is very difficult to be a pure Athenian when you behave like a Spartan. Spirituality in Israel is a crippled spirituality. But there is also good news: I think there is a beginning of renaissance. I published a new book, which is a full scale new interpretation of the five books of Moses with ancient and traditional input and modern and liberal commitment. I am trying to offer a new spiritual way to Judaism and Israelis.

Mr. Burg, thank you very much for the interview.

*The Interview was conducted
by Ludwig Watzal,
editor and publicist in Bonn.*