

**Q&A with Bernard Avishai, author of
THE HEBREW REPUBLIC: *How Secular Democracy
and Global Enterprise Will Bring Israel Peace At Last***

Q: It has been over twenty years since your last book, *The Tragedy of Zionism*, which was quite controversial when it was published. After all these years, what compelled you to write **THE HEBREW REPUBLIC? Do you expect the book to illicit the same heated response that you received with *The Tragedy of Zionism*?**

BA: When my first book came out, a number of its admirers said it was ahead of its time. I have since learned, after many years in management consulting, that this was not exactly a compliment. When you are saying something new, you are naturally going to be criticized, but it's important to find a way and time for new ideas to be heard.

The Tragedy of Zionism focused on how Israel's crisis grew, not only out of Arab enmity, but out of certain failures in its own democracy: that the settlement movement, for example, was not simply the result of post-1967 intoxication with the land, but that settlement was inspired and materially supported by residual Zionist institutions that should have been retired in 1948; that Israel's state apparatus was only doing outside of the Green Line after the Six Day War what it had been doing *inside* the Green Line after the War of Independence.

I argued, in effect, that the State of Israel had been founded as two states: a democratic state encasing a revolutionary Zionist settler state, the former developing a Hebrew civil society, the latter privileging rabbinically defined Jews over non-Jews. This contradiction was systematically alienating Israel's substantial Arab minority, while advancing the interests of Jewish orthodoxy. There could be no advance to peace, I concluded, if Israel did not get past the anachronistic Zionist theories and institutions that crimped the evolution of its democracy. These were very difficult things for people to hear in the 1980s. By now, a great many informed people take them for granted.

My new book **THE HEBREW REPUBLIC**, builds on and updates these arguments. The process of integrating and alienating Israeli Arabs is a generation more advanced. The same can be said of ways Orthodox Judaism has been established as a state religion. One quarter of Israeli first-graders are now Arab, and another quarter are rigidly orthodox, devoted to the idea of greater Israel. You don't have to be a prophet to see where the children of Israel are heading.

But something important has changed in Israel since my first book, and this is the integration of the country's elites into global markets and the culture of globalization more generally. More and more educated Israelis are coming to understand that you can't have an economy like Singapore's and the nationalities war like Serbia's. So my new book is in many ways a more hopeful book than my first, even though the dangers

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and the violence are much more extreme today than in 1985. Back then, the culture heroes were the West Bank settlers. Today, the culture heroes today are global entrepreneurs. The people who have the growing political power, global vision, and inherent interest in bringing about the necessary reforms are at least identifiable.

Q: As opposed to a Jewish state, why do you espouse a Hebrew republic?

BA: The Hebrew Republic *is* the Jewish state as the most original forces in the Zionist movement conceived it. It is a democratic country whose language is Hebrew, much the way the French Republic is French. I am not proposing anything terribly original here. I'm just trying to bring Israel up to code. In a way, I'm trying to imagine what Israel would look like if it accepted the charter of the European Union and became a member, as I hope it eventually will be.

Zionism originally grew out of the insight that to survive in the modern world Jews would have to transform themselves into a nation. Jews would embrace scientific doubt, tolerance, individualism, and get out from under the suffocating power of rabbinic orthodoxy. They conceived of a Hebrew enlightenment. Many Zionists, is true, were appalled by the growing power of anti-Semitic movements in Europe. But Jews who were *mainly* concerned about that went to America, not to Palestine. The Hebrew Republic is merely a retrieval of Zionism's original vision, that Jews should ask modern questions, from technological to erotic questions, in Hebrew.

Q: One can be a citizen of Israel but not necessarily a Jewish national. Please briefly explain the difference and why this is cause for concern.

From its inception, the Israeli state apparatus recognized, in effect, two categories of personal status: *ezrahut*, most commonly understood as "citizenship," and *le'om*, which means "nationality" or "peoplehood." Virtually all residents of Mandate Palestine who remained within Israel's international boundary at the end of 1948–49 war, including the 180,000 Arabs, qualified for citizenship. They enjoyed equality in the new civil society, including the right to vote.

But people legally designated *yehudi*, "Jewish nationals"—people with Jewish origins, whether coming from Mandate Palestine or the Diaspora—had other material privileges, accorded by the core Zionist apparatus: residence rights in Jewish settlements owned by the Jewish National Fund, subsidized mortgages, and so forth. Israel has no civil marriage, so being Jewish is also essential if you wish to marry a Jew.



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That such a state of affairs is antithetical to democratic equality, and warps the social expectations of minorities, should be obvious. If things continue as they are, even if the occupied territories completely disappeared tomorrow, Israel will be facing another Intifada within a generation, but this time from its own Arab citizens.

Q: Normally, when people think of others who may bring peace to the Middle East, they think of academics, diplomats, and conflict resolution specialists. As a political economist, how does your perspective differ?

BA: I think I take nothing away from academics and diplomats when I say that the greatest conflict resolution specialists are entrepreneurs and management people working the opportunities globalization provides. This is particularly true in the Arab-Israeli context, where Israeli and Palestinian business people find ways of cooperating to advance their mutual interests. Perhaps the most reliable constituency for peace in Israel today is its rising entrepreneurial class, particularly people working in technology areas.

I've been following the development of Israel's high-tech world since I published one of the first articles about it in the *Harvard Business Review* back in 1991. I've also run one of Israel's leading entrepreneurship programs in recent years, and have come to know many of the young people who are launching businesses. They view things with the kind of cosmopolitan attitudes and secular democratic ideals the country desperately needs to integrate into the region and the wider world. I suspect we will even soon see a new political party in the country that reflects their more open-spirited views. I think it would be hard for people not close to the practices of the global economy to see the importance of these trends.

Q: You say that approximately a quarter of the first-graders in Israel are of Arab descent and another quarter of them are ultra-Orthodox. How do you think the solutions you put forward in THE HEBREW REPUBLIC will unify such a diverse and disparate group of people?

BA: It is not my habit to bet against the capacity of human beings to turn others into enemies. The reason why democratic commonwealths are so precious is that violent conflict is so ubiquitous and so in need of management. The creation of a Hebrew-speaking civil society will not guarantee an immediate end to the suspicion that ultraOrthodox people have for the idea of "Israeliness" and not end either the suspicion Arabs have for the pressures to integrate into a patently Jewish state, even if the state ceases to discriminate in favor of Jews as individuals.

Still, there is no alternative to moving in this secular direction. If Israel is going to have a future, it must become a country in which national identity can be acquired by a process

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of naturalization. You speak the language, you gain the experience of the place, you're a citizen. Secular standards do not mean all people are somehow anti-religious or without strong identities. It means the state does not discriminate in important ways.

Will Israeli Arabs eventually accept the idea that the Hebrew language will be a mother tongue, or a kind of step-mother tongue? The answer is that, after three generations, a great many already do. One recent poll showed that almost half of Israeli Arabs feel closer to Jews than to Palestinians. I interview several such people in my book. Hebrew is for them the language of their modernization, the way English was for Jewish immigrants to America. One of the most interesting interviews is with the writer Sayed Kashua who for obvious reasons loves the work of Kafka, Bellow and Roth.

But I think a Hebrew civil society will also become very attractive to many of the sons and daughters of ultraOrthodox families as time goes by. These are very large families. The poverty and stifling intellectual atmosphere of orthodoxy cannot hold all of these young people anymore than it could hold the Jews of Eastern Europe in the 19th century. Enlightenment comes more naturally to the sixth child than the first.

Moreover, a Hebrew civil society does not in any way challenge the right of individuals or congregations to practice Judaism anyway they want, indeed, where else but in a Hebrew-speaking country would you rather be if you were a practicing Jew of any kind? My book does not suggest that Jews will be replaced by a Hebrews. The Hebrew Republic is simply the appropriate context for Jews to explore what it means to be Jewish and yet not make it impossible for all citizens to feel equal.

Israeli law says, and almost every Israeli will say, that Israel should be Jewish and democratic. The Hebrew Republic is simply the way to make this possible.