

Atzmon's Mistaken "Identity"

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Review: *The Wandering Who? A Study of Jewish Identity Politics*. By Gilad Atzmon. Zero Books, 2011, 202 pages, \$14.95 paperback.

Contents

- [Hunting "Jewish-ness"](#)
- [Roots of a Delusion](#)
- [Misunderstanding Jewish Life](#)
- [Fun-House Mirrors](#)
- [Giving Away the Struggle](#)

GILAD ATZMON IS one hell of a jazz musician, justly counted among the best global practitioners of the art of bop and post-bop. In fact, the dual status of modern jazz as both a pinnacle of African-American artistry and a world music is illustrated by the fact that international musicians like Atzmon have mastered it — and he could probably write a fine book on that subject.

Atzmon is also an ex-Israeli. The discovery of the music of Charlie Parker and other jazz giants, stimulating him to practice the saxophone, to the exclusion by his own account of everything else, became his emotional ticket out of the Zionist ghetto toward a vision of universal human freedom.

As a member of the Israeli air force band — playing music which he and his fellow members hated ("Sometimes we even gathered in the afternoon just to practice playing badly," to avoid being called to perform) — in Lebanon during Israel's 1982 invasion, he encountered the infamous Ansar prison camp, an experience that would transform him into a passionate enemy of Zionism and proponent of Palestinian liberation.

"I noticed that we were surrounded by two dozen concrete blocks each around one square meter in area and 1.3m [just over four feet] high, with small metal doors as entrances. I was horrified by the thought that my army was locking guard dogs into these boxes for the night. Putting my Israeli chutzpah into action, I confronted the officer about these horrible concrete dog cubes. He was quick to reply: 'These are our solitary confinement blocks; after two days in one of these, you become a devoted Zionist!'"

"This was enough for me. I realized that my affair with the Israeli state and with Zionism was over. Yet I still knew very little about Palestine, about the Nakba or even about Judaism and Jewish-ness, for that matter. I only saw then that, as far as I was concerned, Israel was bad news, and I didn't want to have anything further to do with it." (7)

Atzmon ultimately left Israel and settled in London, where he built his musical career and a sizeable body of essays condemning Israel's practices and apologists. With such a background, a book promising "a study of Jewish identity politics" by someone capable of viewing it from both inside and outside would appear to have great potential. It's all the more painful, then, to report that this book is an almost unmitigated disaster.

The fatal flaw is Atzmon's search for that quasi-mystical essence he calls "Jewish-ness" in the previous passage. I'll explore this problem below. As sad as this work is, however, it should not be ignored — partly because Atzmon's arguments have currency among some poorly-informed sectors of the Palestine solidarity movement, and even more because they provide unnecessary ammunition to the movement's enemies. The greatest danger is that they do lead some activists, trying to understand how the power of the Zionist lobby really works, into a blind alley.

Hunting "Jewish-ness"

Atzmon rummages through some strange corners of psychoanalytic literature looking for this presumed essential "Jewish-ness." He's not alone in this — the writer Paul Eisen, who has evolved from pro-Palestinian activism toward Nazi holocaust denial, pursues a similar quest. In reality, however, no such thing exists, and trying to locate it will inevitably lead either to delusions of Jewish superiority or to anti-semitism — stereotypes which are closely related.

There is, of course, Jewish identity, something a lot simpler than Atzmon imagines: Being Jewish isn't fundamentally a religious or political or Zionist or anti-Zionist loyalty, it's a family and extended-family attachment.

The Israeli anti-Zionist Uri Davis (who describes himself as a Hebrew Palestinian) calls this his "tribal" affiliation. How seriously one may take this affiliation, or whether to express it through broader cultural, communal or historical interests, is a matter of choice.

Jewish tradition, much like its Islamic and Christian counterparts, is diverse enough to accommodate the most extreme reactionaries and egalitarian radicals, religious orthodox and secularists, and everything in between. That's also a matter of choice. For Gilad Atzmon, however, this very diversity is the glue that binds together all those "who put their Jewish-ness over and above all their other traits" — whatever that might mean. (16)

Leaving aside those who devote their entire lives to religious study and observance, or fanatical West Bank settler types (I call them the Jewish Klux Klan) — neither of which in any case are the targets of Atzmon's polemic — it's hard to imagine very many Jews for whom "Jewish-ness" ranks "over and above all their other traits."

Not even the creepiest Zionist neoconservatives meet that definition: On the contrary, their American militarist superpatriotism, their devotion to Israeli supremacy, their intellectual worship of imperial power, their Jewish identity and in many cases their pursuit of personal wealth and influence are a seamless whole, free of internal contradiction and certainly untainted by "dual loyalty." The fact that their course is suicidal for Israel, for America and for humanity is obviously an important issue, but a different one.

Atzmon would have none of this. Rather, his concept of "Jewish-ness" reminds me of the theory of dark matter that modern cosmologists believe dominates the universe — an invisible force that pulls Jews into an organic entity, independent of their individual consciousness or politics.

To be sure, Zionists and Jewish religious mystics, as well as authentic anti-semites, believe something like this — but Atzmon gives it his own twist.

Zionism, for Atzmon, "is not a colonial movement with an interest in Palestine," but rather "actually a global movement that is fuelled by a unique tribal solidarity... Apparently, Zionism is not about Israel. Israel is just a volatile territorial asset..."

"In fact, there is no geographical center to the Zionist endeavor. It is hard to determine where Zionist decisions are made. Is it in Jerusalem? In the Knesset, in the Israeli PM office, in the Mossad, or maybe in the ADL's offices in America? It could be in Bernie Madoff's office or somewhere else in Wall Street."

He continues: "It is of course possible that there is no decision-making process at all. It is more than likely that 'Jews' do not have a center or headquarters...that they aren't aware of their particular role within the entire system, the way an organ is not aware of its role within the complexity of the organism...This is probably the Zionist movement's greatest strength. It transformed the Jewish tribal mode into a collective functioning system." (19, 21)

I'm quoting these passages in an effort to illustrate, in Atzmon's own words, his strange amalgam of inside-out Zionism, global-Jewish-conspiracy theory and straight-up raving. I'm afraid they convey only a bit of the strangeness of the argument, but where it leads him is important: The most sinister elements of the Zionist organism are, in fact, the Jewish anti-Zionist Marxists. They provide a veneer of humanistic credibility for "Jewish-ness," while promoting an absurd revolutionary-socialist utopia that mirrors the neoconservative agenda:

"Both Matzpen [the historic revolutionary socialist current, which had Arab and Hebrew (aka Israeli Jewish) members] and the neocons profess to know what liberation means for the Arabs. For the Matzpenist, to liberate Arabs is to turn them into Bolsheviks; the neocon is actually slightly more modest - all he wants is for Arabs to drink their Coca-Cola in a Westernized democratic society." (109)

Roots of a Delusion

Does Atzmon believe that he has himself escaped from "Jewish-ness" to become, as he aspires, simply a human being? He's not sure, and apparently he wrote the book as part of his own spiritual investigation.

That kind of inquiry is OK in itself, but subjectivity is not a good substitute for cultural or anthropological study of communal identities. Although subtitled "A Study of Jewish Identity Politics," the book draws on no empirical studies, data or sociological analysis of Jewish identities as they really are, but largely on the author's peculiar assumptions and introspections.

It appears to me that Atzmon is a very smart guy who's largely self-taught. In the field of his musical artistry, the results are brilliant — in politics and philosophy, I'm afraid, not so much.

As he writes in one very strange passage in the book's strangest chapter: "In my political and ideological writing, I try to establish a philosophical pattern that can enlighten the complexity of Jewish-ness. I search for the metaphysical mechanisms that make Israel and the Jewish world so different." And yet, he continues, "I am not looking at the Jews, or at Jewish identity. I am not looking at Israelis. I am actually looking in the mirror. With contempt, I am actually elaborating on the Jew in me..." (94, emphasis in original)

It is surprising that such a "study" can be praised by some scholars like Richard Falk and John Mearsheimer, who really ought to know better. Professor Mearsheimer's own study of the Israel Lobby, co-authored with Steven Walt, explicitly rejected explaining the Lobby as some uniquely "Jewish" rather than American political phenomenon.

The book has also been widely branded (in general correctly) as an anti-Jewish tract — indeed by its

author, who describes himself as “a proud, self-hating Jew.” (73) Atzmon’s critics in general, however, certainly the pro-Zionist ones, don’t properly diagnose the core of his problem: When Gilad Atzmon made his escape from the Israeli-Zionist ghetto, he took a big part of it with him, and not only the arrogance that is a (stereotypical) Israeli national trademark.

As far as I can make out, Atzmon’s education was imbued with the Israeli attitude that Jewish life for centuries outside the Land of Israel was inherently distorted, tragic if not catastrophic, deeply unfulfilled and able to find purpose and meaning only in the quest to return to Zion. If Zionism itself is repudiated, then, what possible point could remain in being Jewish at all (at least, outside the narrow boundaries of the religiously observant)?

On one level, Atzmon is explicit about the fact that his contempt for “Jewish leftists” derives directly from his grandfather, a rightwing Irgun terrorist commander who “was pretty cross with the Palestinians for dwelling on the land he was sure belonged to him and his people:”

“More than anything, though, my grandfather hated Jewish leftists...As a follower of right wing revisionist Zionist Zeev Jabotinsky, my Grandfather obviously realized that Leftist philosophy together with any form of Jewish value system is a contradiction in terms (and) that tribalism can never live in peace with humanism and universalism.” (1)

In Atzmon’s view, the Zionist-terrorist was honest about who he was and what he wanted, while the “Jewish leftist,” including the anti-Zionist one, serves the function of disguising the very essence of the Zionist enterprise — its fundamental “Jewishness.”

Because he doesn’t list sources, exactly whom Atzmon is targeting is not clear, except that he has previously engaged in vile and obscene polemics against the pioneering Israeli Marxist Moshe Machover (“Moishe of Arabia”), making absolutely false allegations that Machover and the Matzpen current that he co-founded seek to dictate terms to the Palestinians. [1].

Atzmon may or may not know the works of Isaac Deutscher on “the non-Jewish Jew,” or Hannah Arendt, or Walter Benjamin or a host of others from a wide range of Marxist and non-Marxist left perspectives. There’s simply no way to tell. But one thing that the careful reader of these and other analysts of Jewish social history, religion and cultural tradition have in common — and we can add to the list such trenchant contemporary critics as Israel Shahak, Shlomo Sand, Amira Hass and on and on — is that none of them talk about any “philosophical pattern” or “metaphysical mechanisms” that define some kind of Jewish essence or “Jewish-ness.”

Atzmon has read Shlomo Sand’s *The Invention of the Jewish People* — his chapter 17 is a gloss on the book — but doesn’t seem to notice that Sand’s argument doesn’t reinforce the “Jewish-ness” myth, but demolishes it. [2] Indeed, that myth is part and parcel of the Zionist narrative of an organic Jewish yearning for a return to Israel.

Atzmon has swallowed this concept and added his own astonishing corollary that the goal of Zionism isn’t even the colonial settlement of Palestine but the preservation of Jewish tribalism in itself.

This tangle must be seen as part of a bigger issue of Atzmon’s attitudes about Jewish life and history. The book shows not only the influence of his personal rightwing terrorist progenitor, but the deep marks of an Israel-centric education. Only this, I think, can explain some amazingly warped statements by someone who’s very intelligent and has obviously read a lot (again, we don’t know just what) but apparently without a framework in which to understand it.

In his critique of the founders of a group called British Jewish Socialists, for example, Atzmon remarks with his usual caustic (indeed rather Israeli) wit: “I am pretty sure that no one is going to

stop Julia and David [Bard and Rosenberg] from cheering themselves up by reading chapters of Jewish history, an endless chain of catastrophes.” (73)

Now, I happen to agree that in today’s world there is no justification for an all-Jewish socialist organization, certainly not for purposes of maintaining Jewish identity. (The Bund of Eastern Europe was a magnificent fighting Jewish workers’ socialist party, but the social base of its existence was wiped out by genocidal Nazism and Stalinism and certainly doesn’t exist today. Atzmon makes the usual mess of the Russian Social Democrats’ dispute with the Bund, but that discussion is too far afield here.)

The telling point here, however, is that the lachrymose and quite false view of Jewish history outside the Land of Israel as “an endless chain of catastrophes” is very much an Israeli and deeply-rooted Zionist prejudice that sees the body of Jews “in exile” as urgently in need of redemption either by being ingathered to their “homeland” or by giving a whole lot of money to it. But Atzmon once again provides his own creative improvisation: More than the lived experience of catastrophes, it’s the expectation of catastrophe that shapes the historic Jewish psyche.

He calls it “Pre-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” or Pre-TSS, “founded on a imaginary episode set in a hypothetical or imaginary future — in other words, on an event that has never taken place...The amplified fear matures into a traumatic reality.”

This alleged syndrome has been built into Jewish life since the writing of the Hebrew Bible in the fifth century BCE, and indeed “I shall maintain that the Holocaust religion was well established a long time before the Final Solution (1942), well before Kristallnacht (1938), the Nuremburg Laws (1936), and even before Hitler was born (1889). The Holocaust religion is probably as old as the Jews themselves.” (153, 154)

“Pre-TSS” is about as close as Atzmon comes to offering a defining condition of “Jewish-ness.” Given that Zionist and Israeli propaganda posits that Jews were a deformed and pathetic people before they “came home,” I don’t think it’s a mystery where Atzmon picked up this concept.

Misunderstanding Jewish Life

In a very telling endnote, Atzmon states: “Unlike Christianity and Islam, Judaism is a non-reformist religion. In Judaism, there is no room for even minor modifications. Judaism is a sealed list of 613 commandments (Mitzvas) that must be followed strictly. From a Judaic (i.e. religious) point of view, to depart from Judaism is, in practice, to form a new Church.” (197)

This is an obvious exact mirror image of the sickening Islamophobia (“Islam is a totalitarian religious system, incapable of a reformation,” etc.) that pervades neoconservative and Christian-fundamentalist discourse in our society. Anyway, Atzmon’s description is a reasonable approximation of the ultra-Orthodox Judaism that’s growing in Israel and increasingly feared and loathed by the non-religious, but little to do with the past two centuries of Jewish religious innovation, most of which occurred outside Israel.

Post-Enlightenment Western society enabled a transformation of Jewish religious and post-religious culture. It’s a very mixed bag to be sure. On the positive side is the achievement of women’s equality in Jewish ritual, initially pioneered by the Reconstructionist movement and now accepted by pretty much all but the Orthodox minority, stuck in its traditional nasty misogyny rooted in ancient blood superstitions. There’s also the emergence of Jewish Renewal, humanistic and other new currents.

On the negative side we can cite the recent sad collapse of a once emancipatory Reform Judaism back toward nostalgic “tradition” and especially its embrace of Zionism. This isn’t the place for a balance sheet on Jewish life today, but the point is that for Atzmon as for the typical Israeli chauvinist it’s all irrelevant to that mythical essentialist “Jewishness.”

This blindness is also related to the wisdom Atzmon imbibed from his grandfather, that “Leftist philosophy together with any form of Jewish value system is a contradiction in terms.”

It’s true enough that leftwing values do not derive from classic rabbinical Judaism, and that those well-meaning folks (Jews and others) who search out scraps of humanistic and universal insights in the Talmud are being, on the whole — well, rather talmudic. But the “Jewish value system” that embraced and yes, also helped to shape a couple of centuries of international struggle for democratic and revolutionary transformation, arose from a revolt against Jewish religious and communal authority — and drew upon older traditions of Jewish dissidence as well as the broader societies in which Jews lived.

Leftist Jewish developments were never “purely” Jewish, of course. Nor was or is anything else in Jewish life “purely” Jewish — including Zionism! — for exactly the same reasons that there is no such thing as hermetic “Jewishness.”

Fun-House Mirrors

Unanchored in serious historical or social science, Atzmon’s quest for “Jewish-ness” staggers through some of the Jews-invented-capitalism and other quarter-truth stereotypes that are stocks-in-trade of Jewish chauvinists and anti-semites alike.

I won’t try to detail the whole dreary list here: the Jew Alan Greenspan architected the collapse of the international financial system through a bubble-driven boom designed to “divert the attention from the disastrous war in Iraq” (27), which in turn was the product of the Jew Paul Wolfowitz’s scheme to tie the American superpower to “global Zionist interests” (23), which at bottom is mirrored by the Jewish Matzpen Marxists’ fantasy of forcing Palestinian liberation into the impossible mold of a Middle Eastern socialist revolution (“Matzpen and Wolfowitz,” 108-110), and so forth.

Atzmon renders nonsense in such exaggerated terms that it becomes actually funny. Don’t even ask me how John Mearsheimer could possibly have fallen for this. But there are a couple of points where Atzmon’s inquiry enters a fun-house of mirrors.

I referred above to “the book’s strangest chapter,” which has got to be the one on “Sex and Anti-Semitism” (89-96).

While Atzmon doesn’t rely on works by Jewish or non-Jewish historians or social scientists, somewhere in his extensive reading he encountered the work of the now-obscure Otto Weininger, “one of the most influential thinkers of the first four decades of the twentieth century...an anti-Semite as well as a radical misogynist [who] didn’t like Jews or women, yet, as you might have already suspected he was a Jew himself and, insofar as historical research can disclose such truths, an effeminate one.” (89)

In his only published book *Sex and Character* (1903), two years before his suicide at age 23, Atzmon tells us, Weininger postulated that men and women have mixtures of “masculine” and “feminine” traits, such that (for example) a 55% masculine/45% feminine man will be ideally attracted to a 45%

masculine/55% feminine woman, because their opposite masculine and feminine traits will attract each other sexually, while their shared masculine-masculine and feminine-feminine qualities will provide mutual empathy.

Whatever one might make of this, shall we charitably say, antiquarian theorization of sexuality, Atzmon quotes Weininger to the effect that “we only hate in others what we do not wish to be and what, notwithstanding, we are partly,” and hence that “the bitterest anti-Semites are to be found among the Jews themselves.”

Atzmon concludes for himself, then, that “Jewish-ness” is to be understood as “a mindset that some of us possess and a very few of us try to oppose.” Just as “the Nazi hatred toward anything even remotely Jewish could also be explained as a form of hostility toward the Jew within,” then, “I have to admit that my own personal war against Zionism and Jewish identity politics could be seen as a war I have declared against myself.” (94, 95)

To this one can only respond, “speak for yourself, dude.”

Giving Away the Struggle

There isn't the space here to explore all of Atzmon's strange pathways, but what matters ultimately is that he gives away the struggle for universal values in the name of upholding them.

The point of Marxist anti-Zionism (whether “Jewish,” Arab or other) is to place the struggle for Palestinian freedom in the context of the global struggle against colonialism, imperialism and internal as well as external forms of oppression. For Atzmon, it's nothing but a ploy to disarm what he considers the Palestinian struggle's real weapons: Arab nationalism and Islam.

I said at the outset that this book was “an almost unmitigated disaster.” In fact, there are flashes of insight where the author draws on his own experience. His account of learning to play Arab music, by relying on “the primacy of the ear,” is intriguing and could make an excellent extended essay. (10-11) His brief observations on how Zionism has become largely irrelevant as an ideology in the ordinary lives of Israelis, even while taking on greater force as an organizing myth in Jewish life internationally, would be worth expanding.

Tragically, in most of this book Gilad Atzmon swings a polemical axe wildly in all directions, hitting the wrong targets and causing all kinds of collateral damage. Despite everything, however, if he brings his musical axe to a venue near me, I won't want to miss it.

David Finkel

P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC) 157, March/April 2012. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/current>

Footnotes

[1] See <http://www.gilad.co.uk/writings/gilad-atzmon-tribal-marxism-for-dummies.html>

[2] My review of Sand's book can be read at <http://www.solidarity-us.org/current/node/2805>. Available on ESSF (article 24522), [Myths of the Exile and Return - On "The Invention of the Jewish People"](#).