

“Greater Israel” in Real Life - A review of Max Blumenthal’s “Goliath”

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***Goliath: Life and Loathing in Greater Israel.* By Max Blumenthal. New York : Nation Books, 2012, 496 pages, \$27.99 hardcover.**

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AFTER ALL THAT has been said and done over the past several decades, Israel continues to enjoy a reservoir of support in the United States. From time to time the country pops up on American TV screens hurling missiles at and driving tanks over neighboring populations in Gaza, Lebanon and the West Bank. Like the love affair Americans have with the stock market, however, Israel’s stock keeps bouncing back.

The reasons for America’s seemingly unsinkable attachment to this desert garrison state are not very difficult to fathom. “Israel,” after all, “is the only democracy in the Middle East,” runs the common refrain.

Democracy here is a code word for — white civilized people who speak like us, think like us and, crucially, suffer and die like us. They cry and anguish over the same things we do. They value human life. They are tolerant, moderate, accepting. They treat women with dignity and equality, and allow them the freedom to dress in western style clothes, date, work and travel, and even serve in the military. Like us, Israel is religiously tolerant, multi-ethnic and open to new ideas.

Lastly, Israel is the step-child of the Holocaust, literally a country that emerged from the ashes of the past. It is the answer to anti-Semitism, as the professed racial tolerance of America is our answer to the racism and the slavery of the past.

Needless to say, careful observers of the history of the past sixty years know that the beliefs Americans harbor of Israel are easily overturned by the actual record of usurpation of the Palestinians from their native land, the repression of the remaining population, and aggression against neighboring countries. Much of this is well known and amply documented in numerous books by scholars (including some Israeli historians), and reports by United Nations agencies and international human rights organizations.

Less well known is the entrenchment of Israeli polity and society into an “ethnocracy” (to borrow a concept from Max Blumenthal’s book under review), where democracy is largely limited to Jewish

Israelis, and the “Jewish and democratic” character of the state is ingrained in law and reaffirmed by social practice against its (mostly Arab) non-Jewish citizens.

The rightward shift in Israel’s political mainstream in recent years leaves Palestinian citizens of Israel living in something like the old Jim Crow South. We are talking about a rightward tilt far beyond conventional stereotype. Most Americans would be surprised to learn that the dominant political forces in Israel today display an open contempt for democracy and democratic institutions, with a primary concern that the state be Jewish above all else.

Unmasking Ethnic Supremacy

Not surprisingly, accompanying the drive for Jewish ethnic supremacy is the spread of an uninhibited racism and ethno-religious nationalism. It is the rise of unabashed Jewish supremacy with its violent and racist trappings that Max Blumenthal seeks to expose. He accomplishes his task admirably in seventy-three crisp, easy-to-digest chapters spanning some 400 pages of text.

Like any good messenger worthy of his salt, Blumenthal was immediately set upon by left-liberal Zionist writers like Eric Alterman in *The Nation* (Nov. 4, 2013) [1]. He was also the subject of a smear by Rosie Gray in Buzzfeed (Nov. 6, 2013) [2]. On the right, no book critical of the Holy State can go unbarked at by Prof. Alan Dershowitz, Israel’s rottweiler in the U.S. opinion-making industry. [3]

Further indication that Blumenthal’s message had hit a sensitive nerve, *Goliath* has been essentially ignored in the mainstream. On the surface this is odd, since his previous book *Republican Gomorrah* garnered great praise in the mainstream, riding to the top of the best-seller list. The investigative methods Blumenthal honed in researching the U.S. radical right were deployed in his four-year-long research in Israel/Palestine. Blumenthal expounds on his investigative methods:

“I conceived this book project before I even started my first book, Republican Gomorrah, and when I was beginning to refine the tactics that were working really well in exposing the radical right and the Republican Party. I was simply insinuating myself into the institutions of the GOP base, and into the gatherings this party would hold, getting to know people, trying to understand their mentality, and then following up with them. And making constant calls instead of relying on other people to do the reporting for me. From there, I’d conduct my own research and analysis and immerse myself in the history of the Christian right.” [4]

To get a handle on the mindset of Israelis, Blumenthal visited Israeli schools, talked to students, principals, and scholars. He went into a Border Police post, attended meetings of right-wing Israelis, etc. He engaged several key members of the Knesset in dialog that proved to be one of the most revealing moments in the book.

“Another institution that I immersed myself in was the Knesset, interviewing the Knesset members who were behind the anti-democratic laws that kept pouring out of the chamber every week: laws limiting the speech of Palestinian citizens of Israel, attacking the financing of human rights NGOs, attempting to define Israel as a Jewish state first before a democratic state. And also I interviewed their targets in the Knesset, like Haneen Zoabi, probably the most hated woman in Israel, who is a Palestinian representative from the Balad party who traveled on the Free Gaza flotilla and witnessed the massacre on the Mavi Marmara and was nearly physically attacked in the Knesset when she returned. By immersing myself in the key institutions of Israeli life I was really able to paint a complete picture of what’s driving this country over the edge.” [5]

Certainly Goliath is not the first work critical of Israel to face oblivion in the U.S. market. What then sent Eric Alterman into apoplectic shock, declaring Goliath worthy of “the Hamas Book of the Month Club selection”?

To be sure, Max Blumenthal’s status as a best-selling author and his father Sidney Blumenthal’s standing as an established writer and Clinton advisor lent him credibility. But as we shall see, Blumenthal also had the temerity to say things about Israel that should not be mentioned in polite company; for example, the raw truth that the current right-wing, racist atmosphere in the Jewish state today is rooted in the fundamental project of political Zionism that paradoxically was socialist and left-leaning in its origins.

The Book

Goliath is difficult to describe as the book covers lots of terrain and moves in multiple directions. On nearly every page is a Cracker Jack box with at least one surprise, in the sense of an astonishing fact or event guaranteed to reveal unsettling things about the country and its people.

Blumenthal is at his best introducing the reader to various behind-the-scenes personalities like the right-wing characters driving much of the legislative agenda in the Israeli Knesset. He arrived in Israel in 2009 just as the country had elected the most right-wing government in its history, shortly after Operation Cast Lead in which the Israeli military mauled Gaza’s 1.5 million impoverished residents in a brazen act of aggression.

While the new governing coalition was nominally headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, the man behind the scenes was a former baggage handler and nightclub bouncer from Moldova, Avigdor Lieberman, head of the extremist Yisrael Beiteinu party. Lieberman had declared that his party would join a coalition government only if “practical steps are taken for Israel to ‘finish the job’ of annihilating Hamas,” the political movement governing the recently battered Gaza Strip.

In addition, Lieberman demanded a new citizenship law implementing his campaign slogan, “No loyalty, no citizenship,” which basically mandated that nominal citizens (read Palestinian Israelis) displaying “disloyalty” to the state would be stripped of their citizenship.

Long story short, Netanyahu formed a governing coalition with Lieberman without audible protest in Israeli society. Thus the man whom the Ashkenazi elite of Israel’s central coast branded a “proto-fascist thug” rose to political prominence and is today Israel’s foreign minister. His legislative agenda, needless to say, has been accomplished in spades. (14-19)

Blumenthal backfills for the reader on Lieberman’s election slogan “No loyalty, no citizenship.” “When older Yisrael Beiteinu activists gathered at their party’s national convention in Nazareth Illit — a Jewish city overlooking the historic Arab city of Nazareth that had served as a staging point for anti-Arab riots during the Second Intifada — they were greeted by crowds of cheering high school students who were chanting ‘Death to Arabs’ and ‘No loyalty, No Citizenship.’”(15)

We learn later that the chant, “Death to Arabs” is commonplace in Jerusalem’s main soccer stadium and is chanted wildly every time the home team (Betar) scores a goal.

To Max Blumenthal’s credit, what makes his book stand head and shoulders above most liberal Americans writing about Israel is that he lays bare the driving force animating Israeli polity and society: Israel must maintain a decisive Jewish majority. As he observes:

“In the battle between Israel’s right- and left-wing parties, the principal disagreement lay in how to best to maintain the country’s Jewish demographic majority, and then in how to preserve its political dominance over Palestinians. While many right-wingers argued for open methods of ethnic cleansing like transfer, members of the Zionist left responded with calls for a separation wall or ‘land swaps’ amounting to a population transfer through negotiations. Neither side considered the notion of equal rights for all Palestinians living under Israeli control to be anything short of a recipe for the destruction of Zionism.” (74)

This in a nutshell is the key to unlocking Israeli politics. For some major right-wing supremacist political parties like Yisrael Beiteinu, democratic institutions like the Israeli Supreme Court stand in the way of “the untrammled will of the Jewish majority” and therefore must be neutered through changes in the law.

Israel’s Nuremburg Laws

Blumenthal goes into excruciating detail to reveal how right-wing ideologues like Avigdor Lieberman and his protégé David Rotem cranked out one after another legislative bill aimed at consolidating Jewish supremacy over state and society, under innocuous-sounding titles like the “Acceptance to Communities Bill” which would allow small communities to officially segregate on an ethnic basis.

Other laws like the two “Declaration of Allegiance” bills require even members of the Knesset to swear allegiance to the “Jewish and democratic state, its laws, symbols, and anthem,” as a condition of maintaining their citizenship!

The “Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law” banned West Bank Palestinians from obtaining citizenship if they married Israeli citizens, and even blocked them from receiving temporary residency to live with their spouses. The Citizenship law was hailed by mainstream political class as, in the words of one prominent columnist, saving Israel from a “well-planned invasion” (72-73).

Blumenthal sums up the myopic views of David Rotem, author of many of the racist laws, and by extension the pulse of mainstream Israeli society: “To avenge the humiliation of the Nuremburg laws, a suite of discriminatory measures that stripped Jews of the right to work or participate in the affairs of German state, Rotem was introducing a battery of measures intended to do more or less the same to Israel’s Palestinian minority.” (76)

In the same vein, the Knesset passed in March 2011, among other legislation, a law fining any municipalities, including Palestinian Israeli towns, from commemorating the Nakba (the “Catastrophe”), the expulsion of 700,000 Palestinians from their lands in 1948 to make way for the creation of Israel. (226)

Equally alarming is that the right-wing, anti-Arab, anti-democratic mentality of Lieberman’s Yisrael Beiteinu and other far right parties has been gaining ground among Israel’s Jewish youth. In mock elections conducted at ten high schools across Israel during the attack on Gaza, Yisrael Beiteinu “triumphed over all other parties.” (16)

Expanding the lens further, Blumenthal introduces the research of Daniel Bar-Tal, a world-renowned political psychologist from Tel Aviv University, who conducted a ground-breaking survey of Jewish Israeli attitudes after Operation Cast Lead.

Summarizing Bar-Tal’s findings, journalist Akiva Eldar wrote, “Israeli Jews’ consciousness is characterized by a sense of victimization, a siege mentality, blind patriotism, belligerence, self-

righteousness, dehumanization of the Palestinians, and insensitivity to their suffering. The fighting in Gaza dashed the little hope Bar-Tal had left — that this public would exchange the drums of war for the cooing of doves.” (18)

For supporters of Israel with a social justice conscience — a trait shared by a majority of American Jews — the political trends in Israel are not reassuring. Blumenthal cites a 2006 poll by the Center for the Struggle Against Racism, an Israeli NGO, which found “that 68 percent of Israeli Jews would refuse to live in the same building as an Arab. Nearly half of those polled would not even allow an Arab into their home, while 63 percent agreed with the statement, ‘Arabs are a security and demographic threat to the state.’ Meanwhile, 40 percent expressed support for encouraging Palestinian citizens of Israel to leave.” (18)

Vignettes Off the Tourist Track

With this background firmly established, Blumenthal takes the reader around Israel and the Palestinian territories meeting with various activists, interviewing rightwing political leaders and operatives, attending anti-African migrant rallies, witnessing Palestinian demonstrations in the occupied territories, among dozens of other vignettes.

For readers who have never been to Israel/Palestine, traveling vicariously with Blumenthal is an inexpensive and safe way to see a side of the place that most tourists never see. Even readers who are familiar with the West Bank or parts of Israel, Goliath has much to offer as Blumenthal spent nearly four years in the area moving among Palestinians in the West Bank and in the Jewish majority cities of Jaffa and Haifa.

He also introduces the reader to an eclectic collection of Israeli left-wing and peace activists, who appear even more stressed and alienated than the Palestinians they are allied with.

Goliath is more than anything else a collection of poignant vignettes of people and places in Greater Israel. In this way Blumenthal’s years of field work comes across in searing ways. Here is a sampling that give a flavor of the breadth and scope of the work.

Yad Vashem — A group of 14 Palestinian women from the West Bank visit Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. The trip was arranged by the Israeli Bereaved Families Forum, which “promotes dialogue and understanding between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians who have lost family members in the conflict.” (193)

“Sharmouta!” a mob of pre-adolescent Jewish children shouted at the women, using the Arabic word for “whore,” as well as “Zonot!” its Hebrew equivalent. The Jewish Israeli trip organizers were as horrified as were the Palestinian women. As one of the Israeli facilitators remarked to a Hebrew news site “For these children, it doesn’t matter where they are, even at Yad Vashem. They have been taught to see the Palestinians as enemies, so that’s how they behave.” (193)

Azad Café — Fidaa Kiwan, an Israeli Palestinian woman, with a partner opened Azad Café (“Free People”) in Haifa where Israeli Arabs and Jews could find a place to mingle. “To cultivate the café as a sanctuary of equal coexistence, its owners insisted on enforcing a policy that defied Israeli society’s culture of militarism: ‘No uniforms allowed’ read the sign on its door.”

A soldier in uniform challenged the policy; was politely ask to return out of uniform. He set in motion a hysterical protest framed against an “Arab-run establishment that refuses to serve Israeli soldiers.” The protests which went nationwide via the press and Facebook eventually made it

impossible for the café to conduct business, resulting in its closing.

A Facebook group called “Boycott Azad” opened the floodgates to racist invective and hatred toward the café, Palestinians and Arabs generally. The courts further piled on by forcing the café owners to pay “compensation” to the offended soldier, though they violated no laws! (159-160)

The African Asylum Seekers — By 2010, Israel “hosted” 20,000 refugees and asylum seekers, many from sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia. Israel refused to give them work permits, and anti-immigrant riots have erupted in a most racist fashion. (332)

In 2012 the government was authorized to arrest and hold anyone deemed an “infiltrator,” namely, non-Jewish asylum seekers and migrants, in internment camps for a period as long as three years without being charged or receiving trial.”

Ketziot is the largest detention facility in the world; a concentration camp designed to prevent non-Jewish Africans from “changing the character of the state.” (62) Prime Minister Netanyahu described the African asylum seekers as a “concrete threat to the Jewish and democratic character of the country.” (333) Blumenthal produced a video focusing on racist and discriminatory attitudes toward African refugees in Israel called “Feeling the Hate,” which has since been banned by YouTube and other venues.

How to Kill Goyim and Influence People

One of Blumenthal’s must-read chapters concerns the Torat Ha’Melech, or the King’s Torah, a far right religious tome that sanctions the killing of gentile babies. “There is justification for killing babies if it is clear that they will grow up to harm us, and in such a situation they may be harmed deliberately, and not only during combat with adults.” (303)

Written by two settler rabbis in 2009, the work has achieved far-reaching influence in the military. Although most rabbinical authorities are reluctant to openly endorse its teachings (fearing loss of state subsidies), many religious nationalists take it to heart.

Blumenthal situates Torat Ha’Melech and accompanying mind-set in secular Zionism’s insistence, at Israel’s founding, on not separating religion and state. As religious nationalism has spread its wings during decades of occupation, it has made the state a captive of its own original Faustian bargain with the religious, whereby governing coalitions must accommodate religious fanatics or lose their governing margin. (303-312)

I can’t give *Goliath* a better sendup than the one Jerry Haber (aka Charles H. Manekin), an observant Jew, gave the book in his blog, *The Magnes Zionist*:

“I read half of Max Blumenthal’s new book Goliath on Shabbat, and I would like to send a copy to every Jew I know, especially every PEP Jew I know (“PEP” means “progressive except for Palestine.”) This is the sort of book that even if you want to diss it, you can’t dismiss it. To quote PEP critic, Eric Alterman, the book is “mostly technically accurate.” And that should be enough to make anybody’s hair stand on end.” [6]

Eric Alterman’s “ Hamas Book-of-the-Month” selection appeals at least to one American Jewish/Israeli reader, as well as this anti-Hamas Palestinian-American reviewer.

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P.S.

* From Against the Current n°170, May/June 2014:

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4168>

Footnotes

[1] Eric Alterman, "The 'I Hate Israel' Handbook," The Nation, Nov. 4, 2013 (Abbreviated online version, October 16).

[2] Rosie Gray, "Clinton Adviser Sid Blumenthal's New Cause: His Son's Anti-Israel Book," BuzzFeed, Nov. 6, 2013.

[3] http://www.salon.com/2013/12/04/max_blumenthal_i_knew_alterman_would_freak_ou

[4] "I wanted to show Americans what they're paying for" — Max Blumenthal on why he wrote Goliath, Interview with Alex Kane, Mondoweiss & AlterNet, Oct. 16, 2013, <http://mondoweiss.net/2013/10/americans-blumenthal-goliath.html>.

[5] Ibid.

[6] The Magnes Zionist, Oct. 20, 2013
<http://www.jeremiahhaber.com/search?q=blumenthal%27s+goliath>.