

ISRAEL STUDIES IN NEW YORK

Allan Arkush

The twenty-fourth annual conference of the Association for Israel Studies (AIS) took place May 19–21 at New York University. Compared to the annual AJS conference, AIS runs a small event, with only about four hundred registered participants. But that’s far from tiny. For three full days, from morning until evening, there were dozens of panels, with five events underway concurrently most of the time. As a visitor to this conference, I could therefore hope to obtain only a very partial view of things. Rather than try to present an accurate overview of a gathering where I had to miss 80 percent of the events, I will focus here on the two occasions when most of the conference-goers assembled together in one place, the opening banquet and the plenary session.

The conference took place during the very month that Israel turned sixty, rendering it particularly appropriate to ask the question posed by the keynote speaker, the eminent Tel Aviv University historian Anita Shapira: “What would the founding father say” if he could see Israel today? Ben-Gurion,

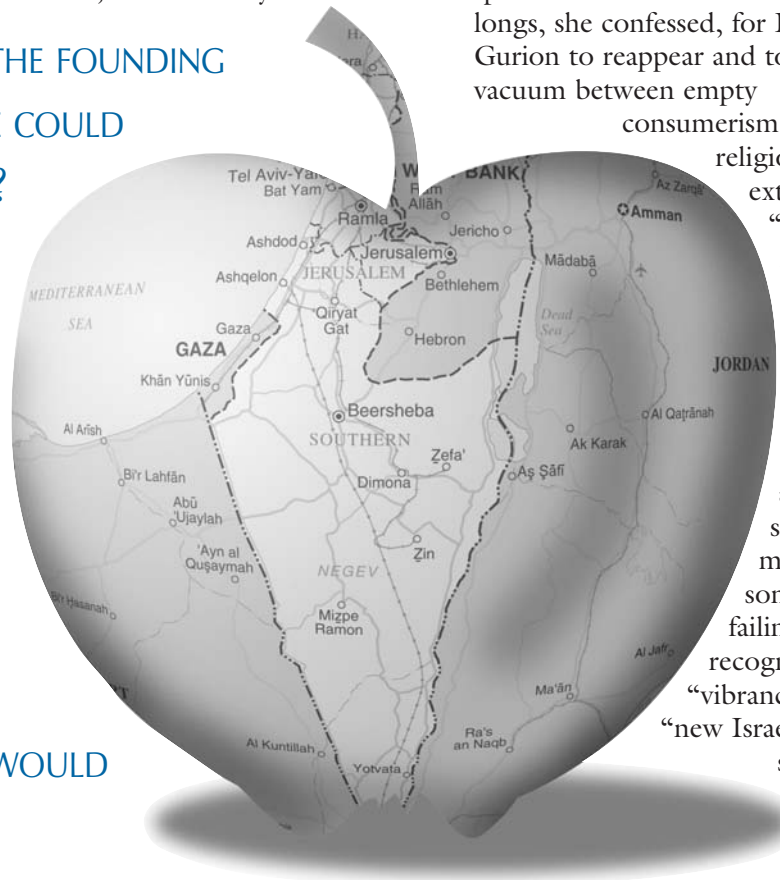
Shapira mused, would be gratified to see how Israel had grown, but he would be disheartened by much of what would meet his eyes. He would be dismayed to see how the Bible had drifted out of the consciousness of nonreligious Israelis and been replaced by a Hebrew literature and musical culture that eschewed the old collective ethos in favor of an extreme individualism, which she described as “a trivial, Seinfeldian outlook.” He would see how the melting pot ideology had been largely replaced by sector-based identities, reinforced by a

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multiculturalism that “not only accepts but sanctifies cultural difference.” Ben-Gurion would lament the fact that the decline of the collective ethos was accompanied by a decline in the status of the military, an increasing inability to accept the necessity of casualties in war, and a growing tolerance for draft dodging. He would deplore the development of a deeply regrettable “dualism,” an

“abandonment of mutual responsibility” in a society where hedonism flourished in the center of the country while Qassam rockets rained on the periphery. Ben-Gurion would be shocked, said Shapira, to see the resurgence of ultra-Orthodoxy, which he had consigned to the graveyard of history or at least to its margins. This phenomenon, Shapira speculated in her own right, could be attributed in part to people’s unsatisfied need for answers to the question “What is it all for?” And then she proceeded to drop her rhetorical mask completely and to speak in her own name. One almost longs, she confessed, for Ben-Gurion to reappear and to fill the vacuum between empty

consumerism and religious extremism, “to redefine the moral basis of Israeli society.” Perhaps, she admitted, she was missing something, failing to recognize the “vibrancy” of the “new Israelism.” But she did not really think so.



Shapira’s keynote address did not exactly set the stage for the conference, whose principal theme was not “Where Is Israel Going?” but “60 Years after 1948: Are the Narratives Converging?” The same words also served as the title of the plenary session, which involved participants representing quite diverse positions on the political spectrum, including two Arabs. One

speaker, the eminent soldier, peace activist and historian, Mordecai Bar-On, spoke for all, I believe, when he stressed that scholars had the responsibility to regard other people's narratives with compassion and understanding and that it was their duty to narrow the gap between divergent narratives by engaging in critical study of their own side's version of events. With regard to 1948, for example, it was important to recognize, as Bar-On himself sought to show, that the old Zionist tale of a victory of the Israeli David over the Arab Goliath constituted a serious distortion of the truth.

Bar-On's sentiments were echoed by Benny Morris, the pioneering "new historian." Over the years, he stated, he and other intellectually honest Israeli researchers have moved closer to the Arab narrative in certain important respects, especially regarding the 1948 war and the origin of the Palestinian refugee problem. He laid great stress, however, on the fact that nothing comparable was happening on the other side of the fence. Among the Arabs, history remains subservient to ideology and there is no significant departure from the conventional, official narrative. In his constant research trips all over the world, he reported, he has almost never run into Palestinian colleagues in the archives. There will be no possibility of a unified history, a convergence of narratives, he said, until this situation changes.

Zachary Lockman, a professor of Middle Eastern Studies at NYU, agreed with Morris that Israeli scholars have succeeded in considerable measure in recent years in breaking away from the self-congratulatory narratives of their own community, but he disputed his contention that no such thing had occurred among the Palestinians. Pointing to the work of Edward Said and Rashid Khalidi, in particular, he

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maintained that the Palestinians have produced good scholarship about their own people. What one cannot expect from the Palestinians, however, is a transcendence of nationalist narrative, not, at least, as long as they remain a people subject to the oppressive rule of others. And what is the case with scholars is even more the case with respect to everyone else. In general, Lockman observed, the national narratives of ordinary people are sustained not by scholars but by their fears and perceptions of their own interests. The ongoing violence and hostility in the Middle East are for the foreseeable future going to constitute insurmountable obstacles to the broad dissemination of nonpartisan understandings of the past.

Morris responded by observing that Israel is far from having freed itself from fear and is still capable of generating a dispassionate study of its own history. It would be nice, he concluded, if there were more convergence of narratives, but historians should not make that their goal. What they should do is pursue the truth—and convergence will then follow on its own.

The AIS conference was obviously not the place to assess the relative merits of Morris's and Lockman's generalizations with respect to Arab scholars. But it certainly provided abundant evidence that their calls for dispassionate pursuit of the truth

about the Israeli-Arab conflict are not falling on deaf ears among Israelis, who constituted perhaps two thirds of those in attendance (if one includes in the count those who are long-term residents of other countries). The voices highly critical of Israel and the Israeli narrative definitely outnumbered those that were unqualifiedly supportive of them. No one in his right mind could have come away from this conference suspecting that these academics generally subordinate their scholarship to their nation's aims in the way that the majority of their predecessors once did. "What would Ben-Gurion have thought," I wondered as I left, if he had attended this conference? I don't think he would have found it very much to his liking.

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