

READING HANS KOHN IN HAIFA

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I have been doing work in Jewish studies and studying Hebrew for some years now, but it was not until this past summer that I visited Israel for the first time, planning to spend a month at the University of Haifa's *ulpan*. One of the books that I took with me to reread was Hans Kohn's autobiography, *Living in a World Revolution*. In ways that I had not anticipated, this book continuously intruded into my thoughts during what proved to be a very short stay in Israel.

Living in pre-World War I Prague, Kohn had been strongly influenced by Martin Buber and the writings of Ahad Ha'am. During the war he served in the Austro-Hungarian Army and was captured by the Russians, who imprisoned him first in Samarkand and then in Siberia for five years. Having witnessed the vast destruction of war and the dehumanizing effects of Russian imperialism, Kohn turned away from his earlier neo-romanticism and became committed to the ideals of the Enlightenment which sought to uphold the dignity of every individual.

Kohn moved to Palestine in 1925 in the hope that these ideals could be implemented there. What he saw over the next eight years eventually convinced him otherwise and he departed for the United States in 1933, having concluded that the ongoing struggle between Zionists

and Arabs would lead to the creation of a Jewish state that could only be protected by "bayonets." After resigning from the Zionist Organization, Kohn predicted a stark moral future for the entire enterprise: "The means will have determined the goal. Jewish Palestine will no longer have anything of that Zion for which I once put myself on the line." These words struck me very powerfully when I first read them and they continued to ring in my ears in Israel.

My first roommates in the Jewish state were Arabs, Israeli citizens from the village of Cana where, according to the New Testament account, Jesus turned water into wine. Ahmad and Khalil both came

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from large families. Ahmad's father was a physician who had been trained in Budapest, where he met the Hungarian Christian woman who returned to Israel with him as his wife. Khalil's parents were both Muslim. Though he doesn't follow the rigorous demands of Islamic practice, Khalil believes in God and respects "anyone who believes in one God—Muslim, Jewish, or Christian." When I asked him if Zoroastrians made the cut, he emphatically denied that they do. Ahmad had a much more cynical attitude toward religious belief, perhaps on account of his mixed origins. "Look around us," he exhorted me, "all of this—it sucks. We kill each other over whose myth is more right." Whereas Khalil, a

nursing major, was excited about the growth of jobs in his field in Israel, Ahmad, a computer science student, hoped to move to Australia where he expected to find "nice weather and beautiful women."

I had scarcely settled into the dormitory and begun to become acquainted with my roommates when the second Lebanon war began. Returning from class on the first night of the war, I found Ahmad and Khalil sitting outside our building. I joined them. Soon afterwards, Khalil picked up a *kippah* that our Canadian suitemate, Ari, had left on one of the chairs and held it in his hands. During a pause in our conversation, he put it on—first toward the front of his head, whereupon he began chanting in Arabic and mimicking Muslim prayer, then toward the back of his head, as he feigned davening. As Khalil started to move the *kippah* back into the "Muslim position," Ahmad called out to him.

"Stop, Khalil! Leave it in back! You will be good for their demographics!"

Ahmad was joking, but no one laughed. I stood awkwardly waiting for someone to change the subject. Soon, Khalil took off the *kippah* and we discussed my Hebrew class until he got tired. Before he went to bed, he assured me that he always had time for questions about Hebrew.

After Khalil left, Ahmad and I stood outside and continued to talk, until I finally asked him the basic question that had been on my mind. "What is it like to be an Arab and live here?" "It's all a mess," he replied. "We live here but it isn't home for us. It can't be." I asked if

he would prefer to live in an Arab country. "It's a mess there too. There is nothing for me in the Middle East." He felt that to make the most of his life he would have to leave for "Australia, or maybe New Zealand, since anything is better."

It wasn't long before Hezbollah was hitting Haifa with Katyushas and, at least for a while, our conversations were taking place not outdoors but in the room in our suite that had been transformed into a bomb shelter. We listened to the radio in Hebrew, and I relied on Ahmad to fill in the details that I couldn't catch. "It is all sad," Ahmad muttered, and I concurred. I wanted to know more than I thought was possible to ask about how he, as an Israeli Arab, felt at a time like this.

After some hours we were permitted to leave the shelter rooms but were forbidden to leave our dormitories. I sat awake for most of the night, wondering whether the reality of a Jewish state could ever be reconciled with the need for peace and the obligation to preserve human dignity. Though I was

anything but hostile to the idea of a *Jewish* state, I couldn't help but ask whether it was worth the price of turning people like Ahmad and Khalil into demographic threats to the country in which they lived. I couldn't help but wonder, too, whether it was worth the price of constant fighting with one neighbor or another. Decades earlier, Hans Kohn decided that it wasn't and

pondering the questions that Hans Kohn symbolizes for me, questions that continue to linger in my mind. They press upon my intellect and burden my conscience in new ways because they are now connected with living, breathing human beings who want to make the most of their lives. Although my historical training has taught me to try to keep an objective distance from the



University of Haifa campus. Courtesy of Communications and Media Relations, University of Haifa.

left. He ultimately settled in the United States, where he believed that the values of the Enlightenment stood a much better chance of flourishing.

When our *ulpan* closed down on account of the war, I was back at Ben-Gurion Airport and on my way home to America after having spent just eleven days in Israel. Even as I left the country, I was still

subject of my study, I don't think my brief experience in Haifa will stand in the way of my future scholarship. Rather, it has reinforced for me the importance of certain crucial questions and will, I suspect, influence the direction of my own work for years to come.

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