



Review essay

Making sense of Israeli politics today

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Abstract

This review essay examines recent studies of Israeli society and politics, with a focus on questions of identity, conflict and political boundaries. It looks at different scholarly attempts to address these issues, and reflects on their relevance for broader theoretical paradigms. It concludes by asserting the need for an approach that would combine a focus on culture and identity with an analysis of legal and material realities. This can be done effectively only by including the perspectives of Palestinians (citizens and subjects alike) as an essential part of the analysis.

Keywords

Israeli politics, national identity, Palestine

Gad Yair, *The Code of Israeliness: The Ten Commandments for the 21st Century*, Keter: Jerusalem, 2011; 212 pp.; ISBN 9789650719524 [in Hebrew]

Lev Luis Grinberg, *Politics and Violence in Israel/Palestine: Democracy versus Military Rule*, Routledge: London and New York, 2010; 253 pp.; ISBN 9780415488334, US\$143.00

Yehouda Shenhav, *The Time of the Green Line: A Jewish Political Essay*, Am Oved: Tel Aviv, 2010; 230 pp.; ISBN 978-9651321634 [in Hebrew. Forthcoming in English as *Beyond the Two-State Solution*, Polity: Cambridge, 2012]

Honaida Ghanim, *Reinventing the Nation: Palestinian Intellectuals in Israel*, Magnes Press: Jerusalem, 2009; 206 pp.; ISBN 9789654934152 [in Hebrew]

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Does consciousness determine social being or is it the other way around? A century and a half ago, Karl Marx argued that material reality shaped ideas about society, rather than the reverse. Gad Yair of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem begs to differ. In his book, *The Code of Israeliness*, he reverts to a period when ideas reigned supreme, the national character of groups was easily identifiable, and we could distinguish between collective entities, each with its own history, culture and mentality. Much in the way of an old-fashioned anthropologist, who saw tribes defined by unique cultures wherever he or she looked, the modern-day sociologist regards Israeli Jews as possessing a unique way ('a code') of looking at the world. Yair's mission is to present the 'ten commandments' which shape their behaviour, and thus enable us to make sense of it.

Many of the features Yair identifies would look familiar to anyone who knows the country or has spent time with Israeli Jews: an ever-present sense of impending doom combined with arrogant defiance of external constraints, rude and aggressive behaviour accompanied by an intimate sense of familiarity with complete strangers, supreme confidence and a sense of ownership of land and rights that coexist with a constant fear of being taken advantage of ('being taken for suckers'). This is the raw material Israeli novelists, commentators and comedians have used creatively for decades, and which frequently is a source of both pride and embarrassment for many of the more cosmopolitan members of the national community, as well as Jews elsewhere.

Yair does not only outline these cultural elements, but seeks to explain their origins and outline their implications. It is his move from description to analysis that gives rise to critical questions about the work. In particular, the way he deals with history is problematic. His discussion displays constant slippage between statements about relatively recent material events in Jewish life (the Holocaust, creation and survival of the State of Israel through permanent conflict) and foundational myths that have shaped Jewish consciousness for millennia (for example, the exodus from Egypt, or the attempted genocide of Persian Jews in the Book of Esther). In a similar manner, he slips between trying to explain the specific nature of Israeli identity and the identity of Jews in general, and between the impact of profound historical developments and recent state manipulations.

Take for example his notion that Israeli Jews have been scarred mentally by the Holocaust and therefore tend to respond with post-traumatic aggression towards all those offering suggestions and criticisms, even when these are friendly and supportive forces. Distrust of 'outsiders' and solidarity with 'insiders' are outcomes of this mental conditioning, he argues. But if that were the case, we would expect all Jews, not just those living in Israel, to have developed the same instinctive reactions. And, we would expect them to have done that spontaneously, in the aftermath of the trauma, rather than decades later as a result of an active intervention by the state.

When comparing Jews in Israel and elsewhere we see, in fact, that those who live in western liberal democracies normally show different cultural and political attitudes to their Israeli kin, even if their consciousness of Jewish traumas is the same. Can we contrast then Jewish diaspora mentality with independent Israeli mentality? If yes, the difference cannot be due to what Jews share (historical consciousness of persecution), but to what divides them: living in wealthy, secure nations versus living in a state of permanent war. That the war is an outcome of a campaign to settle and transform the country

against the wishes of its original inhabitants should be part of the story. It accounts for the sense of precarious existence, always in danger of being overwhelmed by forces of restitution.

This explanation does not require of us to abandon the focus on consciousness and culture, only to examine their relationship to social and political contexts. Yair is aware of that, of course, but he prefers to derive current Israeli-Jewish attitudes towards Palestinians from Jewish consciousness rather than explain Jewish consciousness – in its specific Israeli form – as a product of the conquest of the indigenous residents of the land. Because of this he is incapable of seeing the common ground between the cultural attitudes of all groups of settlers wherever they are, who face the challenge of subduing the natives and taking possession of the land.

Yair is interested above all in cracking the 'code' of Israeli culture, and presenting it to his Israeli audience in accessible language and style, which he does well. He is not concerned with developing theoretically valid models. This becomes clear when he tries to apply his analysis to a case study: the Israeli tent protests of July–August 2011. He looks at his list of 'commandments' and selects those which seem to fit the protesters' attitudes and behaviour. But, it is never a problem to find some elements in any theory that would fit the facts. The test is whether the analysis of the past allows us to anticipate what might happen in the future. The book does not pass this test: there is nothing in its discussion of Israeli culture that could have prepared us for an outbreak of popular anger of the nature and scale of summer 2011. If his theory can account for social passivity before that period, as well as for the surge of activity, and the (temporary?) decline that followed, it explains too much: it does not identify specific developments that are more or less likely to happen, and thus it loses its predictive value.

The book's tendency towards ahistorical analysis tends to obscure the manipulative role played by state agencies in shaping the consciousness of persecution. It is not that persecution of Jews was not real, but its centrality in Israeli education, popular culture and political awareness has shifted over time: it was fairly hidden in the 1950s and 1960s, and has occupied an increasingly central role since the late 1970s, with the decline in the international legitimacy enjoyed by Israel due to its occupation policies. In Israel itself and among Jews elsewhere, cultivating a politically useful past centred on the Holocaust is relatively recent. While Yair's book is full of interesting cultural insights and is definitely worth reading, it needs to be supplemented by a more historically grounded political analysis.

Offering precisely such analysis is the main goal of Lev Luis Grinberg's *Politics and Violence in Israel/Palestine*. His starting point is not culture or consciousness but legal and political reality, with particular attention paid to the failure of the 1993 Oslo peace process, and the violent reactions that followed in its aftermath. In order to understand these developments we need to focus on the 'core problem' of the Israeli regime: 'the absence of physical and symbolic borders as a containing framework for conflicts, opposing interests, and rival views' (p. 27).

More accurately, though, it is not really the absence of borders but the fact that there are many of them, serving different purposes, and they are contested: the state includes the Palestinians living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip for purposes of military and economic control, but excludes them legally and politically by reserving democratic law

and elective government to the area within the pre-1967 borders, and subjecting the occupied territories to military law. The result is a dual regime, which combines 'democratic and colonial forms of domination' (p. 22).

To resolve the tension between these different modes of rule we need 'political space', Grinberg's term for an agreed framework allowing peaceful resolution of conflicts. To create such space would require 'two potentially contradictory processes of democratization and decolonization' (p. 22). This is what the Oslo Process – which created a basis for negotiations between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization – aimed to achieve but failed. Instead, it brought about an imagined peace, not a real one: 'The absence of violent Palestinian resistance facilitated Israeli imagination of the agreement as "peace", without having to dismantle the apparatus of military rule and economic domination and without halting the construction of settlements' (p. 99). The result was lack of progress in decolonization, due to obstruction by the Israeli right-wing and military forces. This gave rise to violent reaction from frustrated Palestinians, in turn providing the military with legitimation for its violent suppression of Palestinians: a vicious circle of violence thus ensued and the Oslo Process has ground to a halt.

At the root of these developments, argues Grinberg, is the failure to institutionalize political space, which needs an agreement over the boundaries of the community that contains the different parties: 'Borders are the most important element for the peaceful containment of conflict by means of representation, mediation and compromise. Agreed borders mean either recognition of the sovereignty of the other beyond the frontier, or recognition of legitimate "otherness" within the borders of the state and acceptance of the claims for representation of subjugated groups. In the absence of defined and agreed borders, feelings of fear and insecurity appear, and violence becomes a frequent expression of the conflict between social groups due to the impossibility of containing them by representations' (p. 203).

But the situation in Israel/Palestine has never been that of clear physical boundaries between Jews and Arabs. Even cultural and symbolic boundaries were not a given. They emerged and became consolidated only as a result of the operation of external ideological forces, Zionism in the case of Jews and Arab nationalism in the case of Arabs. The latter was potentially open to including Jews within its boundaries (in other Arab countries), but could not do so in pre-1948 Palestine because of the exclusionary stance of the Zionist movement. Grinberg is aware of all that, and yet seems to be interested only in the attempt to open up political space and its failure. He does not examine how the physical and symbolic borders between communities came into being in the first place and how they have been weakened and reinforced over time.

In other words, Grinberg provides useful and interesting insights regarding developments during the Oslo Process, from 1993 onwards, and addresses the transitions from violence to negotiations and back again, very effectively. But he does not look in depth at the contextual factors that make sense of the entire process. This means examining how boundaries of identity were historically shaped by the different parties, and how their definitions of the relevant space have diverged. For Palestinians, the exclusion of the 1948 refugees is a foundational political act that has shaped their identity ever since. The terms of agreement insisted upon by Israel, according to which refugees will remain excluded, physically and symbolically, can never become acceptable to the Palestinian

leadership and masses, regardless of possible willingness to consider pragmatic solutions to the problem. To regard such attitudes as those of 'extremists', as Grinberg seems to be doing, is not adequate.

In a similar manner, the position of Palestinian citizens of Israel, who do not fit neatly inside the duality of the democratic–military regime, is a product of a process that challenges the boundaries of Israeli citizenship and identity. It is not simply a matter of opening up a 'political space' to negotiate future arrangements peacefully. Rather it involves recognizing that decolonization (withdrawal of Israeli forces from the occupied territories) and democratization (granting equal rights to all Israeli citizens) are interlinked processes, not contradictory ones. In the minds of most Israeli Jews, both would have the same impact: undermining their ability to control their own affairs by diluting the exclusive Jewish character of the state.

Precisely because, *pace* Grinberg, decolonization and democratization are compatible, together they have proved too much for Israeli Jews to digest. The only deal that might be acceptable to them would guarantee Jewish political domination within the pre-1967 boundaries in exchange for relinquishing control over some of the occupied Palestinian territories. This would allow a measure of 'decolonization' at the cost of blocking the process of internal 'democratization' and blocking any prospect of return of the 1948 refugees, even a limited and symbolic one. Such a deal might become acceptable to most Israeli Jews, but not to any sector of the Palestinian people. When Palestinians refused to adopt a similar arrangement in 2000, they were labelled as rejectionist by the Israeli leadership and thus were transformed into a legitimate target for the use of military force.

The real problem with borders is neither their absence nor their multiplicity. Rather, it is the fact that the Israeli leadership – with massive support from its Jewish constituency – regards itself as the sole authority that can legitimately decide when to impose them and when to remove them, where they should be located and to whom they should apply under which circumstances. Palestinian Arabs, of course, have different notions of where the borders should be located and how they should be applied. It is clear that their desirable boundaries of citizenship and rights clash with those preferred by most Israeli Jews. The absence of an impartial overarching authority that can reconcile the different perspectives, which are backed up by massively unequal financial, military and political resources, is the crucial issue any analysis must confront.

The debate over the different ways of looking at the question of borders is framed by Tel Aviv University's Yehouda Shenhav as a clash between two competing paradigms. These are the dominant 1967 paradigm, also known as the Green Line paradigm, of which he is critical, and the marginalized 1948 paradigm, which he seeks to resurrect. In his book *The Time of the Green Line: A Jewish Political Essay*, he addresses the distinction between pre-1967 Israel and the territories occupied since the 1967 war. Although both fall within its overall system of military and political control, Israel has maintained the legal distinction between them, despite the fact that it has been in control of the entire territory for the last 45 years.

Shenhav argues that the distinction made by the Green Line paradigm artificially separates Israel, which the Line signifies as a democratic nation-state of the Jewish people, from the occupied territories. It regards the occupation as an aberration, in that it

introduced a large number of Palestinian non-citizens into the system. However, as long as no final decision is made on the future of the territory it will remain under occupation, and the democratic rights of its Arab residents will remain suspended. This temporary suspension of democracy is a result of the unresolved conflict and it does not affect the democratic nature of Israel itself. The solution to the conflict, according to this paradigm, would be the creation of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, living in peace alongside Israel. Known as the two-state solution, its proponents argue that it will remove the temporary aberration of the occupation, restore Israel's status as a Jewish democratic state and give Palestinians their own nation-state.

What is the problem with this paradigm? Shenhav identifies four 'political anomalies', corresponding to specific interest groups, that make the Green Line paradigm difficult to sustain, namely:

- Palestinian refugees who were dispossessed by the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948. For those of them who were living in the occupied territories during the 1967 war, the occupation may have represented a degree of liberation in the sense that their mobility within their homeland was enhanced as a result.
- Palestinians who remained in Israel after 1948 and became Israeli citizens – for them 1967 represented an opportunity to reunite with their people and the Arab world from which they were forcibly separated when Israel was established.
- Religious-nationalist Jewish settlers – for whom the Green Line is not morally or politically meaningful, and for whom Israel as a Jewish state extends to the Jordan River or beyond.
- Settlers driven by socioeconomic rather than religious-nationalist motivations, primarily Mizrahim, Orthodox Jews and Russian immigrants; in other words, the people of the 'third Israel', who tend to feel marginalized by the dominant political system – for them, the occupation has provided access to land and other substantial benefits.

For all these groups, argues Shenhav, pre-1967 Israel (nostalgically regarded as a democratic haven by adherents of the Green Line paradigm) was an oppressive social and political space. A return to it would not improve their situation and might even make it worse. Although they come from different religious, political and social backgrounds, they are united in rejecting the notion that the two-state solution would lead to a sustainable resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Palestinian refugees would not benefit from the reconstitution of a Jewish Israel from which they would remain excluded; Palestinians inside the Green Line would again be separated from the Arab world, and be subjected to the same exclusion and oppression from which they suffered before 1967; religious-nationalist settlers would oppose their removal from what they see as their God-given homeland; and the people of the 'third Israel' would resent being relegated back into a position of marginality from which the occupation extricated them.

Who would benefit from the two-state solution, then? It would be secular Ashkenazi-Jewish elites, who had political, social, economic and cultural control before the 1967 war, and who have since lost their dominant position. The rise of the Mizrahim, and of religious, immigrant and Arab voices and movements after 1967, has undermined the

dominance of those elites. A return to small 'enlightened' pre-1967 Israel, in which their power was unchallenged, would allow them to reassert their position at the expense of previously marginalized groups. This, Shenhav argues, is the reason these elites are the main proponents of the Green Line paradigm, and they have managed to make this a dominant perspective in public discourse. However, underlying social and cultural currents have led to the paradigm's decline in policy and practice. Diplomatic support for the two-state solution has increased, but so has the blurring of the physical, legal and symbolic borders between Israel and the occupied territories. Most of those living in the region have never experienced any reality other than that of Greater Israel.

Thus, paradoxically, the rhetorical victory of the Green Line paradigm, as expressed in almost unanimous international support for it, and its invocation in all UN resolutions, has disguised its demise in practice. Through massive allocation of state resources, and a consistent policy of expansion, Israel has created a patchwork of disconnected areas in which Palestinians live, criss-crossed by Jewish settlement infrastructure. Removing hundreds of thousands of settlers, and restoring the integrity of the pre-1967 boundaries is virtually impossible, says Shenhav, and the prospect of a viable independent Palestinian state is more remote than ever. Separation between Jewish settlers and local residents in the occupied territories is maintained through an elaborate system of laws and military regulations, with settlers legally and politically incorporated into Israel, while Palestinians live as stateless subjects. The crucial distinction now is between citizens and non-citizens within Greater Israel, rather than between the pre- and post-1967 territories.

What is Shenhav's alternative, then? It is the 1948 paradigm, which is based on treating the historical territory of Palestine as a unified geographical unit, in which many groups with diverse needs coexist.

From a Palestinian perspective it is essential to address the root problem of the 1948 *Nakba* – the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes and homeland, the destruction of hundreds of villages and urban neighbourhoods, and their replacement by Jewish immigrants and settlements. Palestinians who remained within Israeli boundaries were made subject to military rule, dispossessed of much of their land and turned into second-class citizens. Their historical and cultural legacy was largely erased to reinforce an exclusive Jewish claim to the land. All this has affected Jews too, who grow up in wilful ignorance of the history of their country, and live in denial of their active role in shaping the nature of the conflict. Only by addressing its impact, and providing redress for it, will the trauma experienced by Palestinians be overcome. This means that Israeli Jews must acknowledge their responsibility for the part they have played in it, something that they have consistently refused to do.

The 1948 paradigm, Shenhav argues, would allow Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs to reshape their relations in a common space by working within the same framework. This means opening up a process of resolving problems by recognizing that both national groups have legitimate claims that cannot be used to deny the other's rights and needs. This process would address the traumas of both sides, acknowledge the changes wrought by the settlement project, seek to reconcile competing and even contradictory theological claims, redistribute resources equitably between the national collectives and create a new democratic regime that would address the concerns of all groups.

Shenhav does not prescribe a method for resolving the conflict, but offers three possible models. The first is a one-state solution, an unlikely option as it is premised on a homogeneous population, and ignores the large degree of differentiation – cultural, religious and ethnic – between and within Jewish and Arab populations. The second is a two-state solution, but one which ensures a more equitable distribution of land and resources between the two sides. The third is a consociational democracy. This assumes that civil equality at the level of the state could be supplemented by expressions of specific rights and preferences in smaller localized units. Instead of removing ethnicity and religion from the realm of the state, as the one-state model aims to do, this arrangement would reinforce them at the local level, to allow communities to express their identities. In Shenhav's view, some variation on the third model is the likely eventual outcome. In the interim, he argues, a binational model could begin to apply within the Green Line boundaries, to create a bilingual society that would ensure equality of rights between individuals and ethnic-religious collectives.

Shenhav's consociational model recognizes the right of return of Palestinian refugees, although not necessarily to their original homes, and reconciles this with the Law of Return for Jews. This would enable civil equality to coexist with multiple identities, rights and claims of an ethnic, communal and religious nature, and thus open the way for legitimate Palestinian and Jewish self-expression in the shared space of historical Palestine. For him, it is important to assert that Jews have a right to express their collective identity, hence the subtitle of his book, *A Jewish Political Essay*. But he argues that Jews must do so in non-oppressive ways. Only if Israel changes from an exclusionary ethnic state to an inclusive democracy, and accommodates internal ethnic and religious diversity, can such expression become possible. Shenhav argues that this change is as essential for future Jewish prospects in the Middle East as is the restoration of Palestinian rights.

Shenhav's sociological perspective links the notion of 'Israel proper' – a democratic state that supposedly exists independently of the occupation – to Ashkenazi-Jewish elites and their wish to retain socioeconomic and cultural control. This allows him to shift attention to marginalized groups – the 'political anomalies' listed earlier – who, he argues, are united by their opposition to the exclusionary 1967 paradigm. These groups challenge the paradigm from radically different directions, however. Some of them seek to deepen the oppression of Palestinians by imposing further restrictions on their movements and ability to live, work and survive on their land, with a view to driving them out altogether. Others seek to liberate Palestinians from foreign rule and get oppressive Israeli settlers, soldiers and officials off their backs. How can any sense of common purpose be formed out of these violently opposed sentiments?

In his eagerness to force settlers into the 1948 camp, Shenhav ignores glaring contradictions. He maintains that it would be immoral to evict settlers from the homes they acquired as a result of official Israeli policy, arguing that an injustice cannot be fixed by another injustice. But, he fails to consider that if the process by which settlers came to occupy their positions is not reversed, it would be impossible to restore Palestinian rights. Where settlers control resources – land, water, trees, roads, buildings – taken by force or built at the expense of Palestinians, the original injustice is being continuously re-enacted. The problem, of course, is not the mere presence of Jews, but the existence

of settlements as exclusionary enclaves that serve to dispossess the local population, and entrench Israeli rule on an ongoing basis. The professed willingness of some settlers to 'live together' with Arabs as 'neighbours' in the same 'space' does not extend to a willingness to relinquish their spoils and live as equals in open communities. And, the fact that many Jewish communities within pre-1967 Israel are also exclusionary, as he correctly points out, does nothing to address the issues posed by the post-1967 settlements. Blatant practices of dispossession, backed up by military force, political and legal support and economic investment, make them qualitatively different from Jewish settlement within the Green Line.

For this reason, very few Palestinians regard settlers in the occupied territories as legitimate, or recognize their right to remain there, while most do accept the right of Jews to live in pre-1967 Israel (without necessarily accepting Israel as a Jewish state). In the eyes of Palestinians, the post-1967 settlements must be opposed and not embraced as Shenhav proposes. Palestinians may adhere to the 1948 paradigm in regarding the territory of Palestine as one unit, but they do not agree that settlers are – or can become – their partners in finding a solution to the conflict. They might be willing to tolerate their presence if removing them proves too difficult, but that is a far cry from celebrating their presence. In this respect, Shenhav's overriding concern with exposing the inconsistencies of the Zionist left leads him into a tacit alliance with the Zionist right-wing.

On the positive side, Shenhav's focus on internal Israeli debates highlights the links between liberal views (as expressed in the 1967 paradigm) and socioeconomic privilege, as well as those between religious and ethnic identities and the politics of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Shenhav provides a grounded analysis, which replaces the misleading notions of 'left' and 'right' as they are commonly used in Israel. At the same time, his approach obscures the role that occupation and resistance play in Palestinian debates and interpretations, for which he shows scant regard. Despite advocating a paradigm that aims to move beyond the limited concerns of Israeli Jews, Shenhav ends up trapped by the assumption that what matters is how Jews define the situation and propose to change it.

A tendency to direct most attention to Israeli actions and debates is common in scholarly literature, which focuses on what Jews do and say, implicitly accepting that Palestinians are victims, who may deserve sympathy but are of little interest otherwise. This has to do with the informal but deeply entrenched academic division of labour in Israel, in which sociologists and political scientists study Jews, anthropologists study Mizrahim and Arabs inside Israel, and 'orientalists' study other Arabs.

A notable attempt to break away from this practice is offered by Honaida Ghanim, in her book *Reinventing the Nation: Palestinian Intellectuals in Israel*. In her personal and professional history – which she shares with the readers – she embodies the 'liminal space' occupied by Palestinian citizens, moving along the borders of mainstream Israeli society and the Palestinian people in the occupied territories and beyond, properly belonging to both and to neither of them. The concept of liminality – being on the threshold – thus occupies a central place in her analysis: it captures the position and consciousness of being insiders and outsiders at the same time, as the only group among the multiplicity of sub-groups of Israelis and Palestinians that is fully bilingual and at home in both cultures, a minority in an ambiguous position, surviving in an environment that does not really tolerate an in-between status.

Ghanim focuses on intellectuals who, as a social group, display even more prominently the tension between national and civic identity that is common to all Palestinian citizens, between being Israeli-educated and Palestinian-identified, moving between modernity and tradition, both of which being contested concepts that capture some elements of their condition but obscure others. Against this background three responses have emerged, addressing the question of borders in different ways.

The first response regards liminality as an advantage, which allows intellectuals to play a mediating role between Israelis and Palestinians, creating a 'bridge' between these competing groups. The second response rejects that status and seeks to link Palestinian citizens with the wider Palestinian and Arab identities without making any concessions to their Israeli-imposed conditions. The third response, which Ghanim seems to be aligned with, aims to use the in-between position in order to undermine political and ideological domination and reshape Israeli society from within, making it an inclusive and non-ethnic space, where no group enjoys inherent privileges due to its origins. Politically, this position is associated with the quest to make Israel a state of all its citizens equally, and it also has affinities with the notion of a binational solution to the conflict.

This latter response is most interesting from the perspective of this review, because potentially it challenges the notion of group boundaries in the most effective manner. For Yair, borders seem natural, as they reflect the historical group identities of different populations. For Grinberg, borders are an outcome of a political process, they can be opened and closed depending on circumstances; they may serve as a basis for dialogue or for violent clashes, but ultimately they demarcate different historical populations whose existence is taken for granted. Shenhav, in contrast, seeks to remove political borders between groups whose territories overlap and whose histories are intertwined, but he also argues for equality at the level of the state combined with communal autonomy at the local level, a move that would effectively entrench ethnic and religious borders. Ghanim may be the only one who emphasizes that the boundaries between the Israeli and Palestinian groups are not fixed, and that there is a degree of overlap between them which should be explored further. They can be overcome politically, not by abandoning Jewish and Arab identities – that is neither feasible nor desirable – but by normalizing the state so that it is delinked from specific ethnic affiliations. In combining a quest for the universality of rights with deep attachment to historically grounded particularist identifications, there is a willingness to challenge traditional boundaries. What the outcome of such a challenge would be remains uncertain, but given the current mess created by the insistence on established borders, any alternative promises to be an improvement.

Biographical note

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