

Avraham Burg: Apostate or Avatar?

BY JOHN MAHONEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AMEU

Avraham Burg is the author of a new book, “Defeating Hitler,” and the subject of a recent – and provocative – article in *The New Yorker* magazine.

In these publications Burg announces the end of the Zionist enterprise. Want to know, he asks fellow Israelis, why Palestinians blow themselves up in our restaurants? Look at how we treat them. Think our dependence on U.S. dollars and weapons is good? Think again. Want to keep a Jewish majority in our country? No problem. Expel the Arabs or wall them up into Bantustans.

These pronouncements have triggered condemnation all across the Israeli political spectrum and have stirred controversy in the American-Jewish media. His critique, to be sure, does represent something new. But the newness lies not in what he says. As we shall see, other Jews, Israeli and American, have expressed similar viewpoints.

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About This Issue

How might a Catholic feel were the pope to announce he was turning Protestant, moving to Germany, and writing a book called "Luther Won"?

That, say some Israelis, is how they feel about Avraham Burg, former Speaker of the Knesset, now a businessman living in France.

Is Avraham Burg deserting the Zionist ship of state? Or is he — to use a biblical image— a prophet hurling hard truths at corrupt leaders?

This issue looks at the controversy surrounding one of Zionism's political elite.

AMEU's book/video catalog is on pp. 13-15.

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AMEU is saddened to announce the death of longtime National Council member John Trever.

In 1948, as Acting Director of Jerusalem's American School of Oriental Research, Dr Trever was involved with the newly discovered Isaiah "A" scroll. His photographs of the first three scrolls helped to preserve the rare find for future researchers. At Claremont School of Theology in California, he served as Director of the Dead Sea Scrolls Project.

John honored us by lending the prestige of his name to our efforts to help the people in the land of the Isaiah scrolls. He understood that the words of Isaiah ring as true today as when they were first scratched down on parchment: Yahweh is still calling on His people "to let the oppressed go free."

John F. Mahoney
Executive Director

(Continued from Page 1.)

Future of the Zionist Nation State

We are already dead. We haven't received the news yet, but we are dead. It doesn't work anymore. It doesn't work.

— Avraham Burg, Ha'aretz
Weekend Magazine, June 6, 2007

The Israeli nation today rests on a scaffolding of corruption, and on foundations of oppression and injustice. As such, the end of the Zionist enterprise is already on our doorstep. There is a real chance that ours will be the last Zionist generation. There may yet be a Jewish state here, but it will be a different sort, strange and ugly.

— Avraham Burg, The Guardian,
Sept. 15, 2003

The Israeli reality is not exciting. People are not willing to admit it, but Israel has reached the wall. Ask your friends if they are certain their children will live here. How many will say yes? At most fifty per cent. In other words, the Israeli elite has already parted with this place. And without the elite there is no nation.

— Avraham Burg, The New Yorker, July 30, 2007

Sami Esmail's mother was one of the few survivors of the Deir Yassin massacre in 1948. She and her husband eventually came to Brooklyn where they started a dry goods business. When they retired, they moved to Ramallah on the West Bank.

In December 1977, Esmail, a U.S. citizen, was called to the bedside of his dying father. As he deplaned at Ben Gurion Airport, he was arrested and interrogated for hours by Israel's secret police, who wanted him to confess to having received military training in Libya. It was not true, he told them. Israel was supposed to be a democracy, he said. If

they had evidence, let them present it in a court of law. They laughed. There's no democracy here, they scoffed, that's for foreign consumption.

Then, they said, they'd prove it. They stripped him and made sexual jokes. They spat at him. They handcuffed him and brought him to Baedaktic Police Station, and put him in a room 7 by 4 feet. For days, day and night, seven different people interrogated him. At one point he collapsed on the floor, due to lack of sleep. He was dressed and undressed many times. He was punched, his hair was pulled. And they reminded him that his father was dying.

At some point he went crazy and broke out crying and screaming. "Okay," he told them, "Just leave me alone. What do you want me to write?" They dictated a confession saying he was recruited by so and so, his code name was such and such, that he learned how to mantle and dismantle explosives and rifles in Libya.

On June 12, 1978, Esmail was sentenced to 15 months in prison; he was released on October 18, 1978. In an exclusive interview with *The Link* in our November-December 1978 issue, we asked him: How do you assess the role of your Israeli defense attorney, Felicia Langer? His answer:

I consider Felicia Langer as a mother to me. I could see in her face that she was holding me as a child for ten months. She suffered a lot for me. Many times her tears would just start streaking down her face when I would tell her about the things that were happening. And all the little things that she does for you. The second time she came by she brought me a towel and toothpaste and a soap bar, and later on she brought me a shirt, and, when I left, she gave the consul \$20 so I would have spending money. And all the times she would just sit down with

me and give me moral support and guide me. She has been more than a mother to me. The fact that Felicia came out publicly and said that I consider Sami as my second son, and the fact that I have mutual feelings, this is the greatness in it all, as I see it, that Jews and Palestinians can come to a true understanding. My hope is that this will be like a sign of hope for the future; that there can be understanding, a real understanding between people.

Felicia Langer knows the trauma Sami's mother experienced. Her own family had to flee Poland for Russia following the outbreak of World War II, and her husband is a survivor of Nazi concentration camps. She came to Israel in 1950, where she received her law degree in 1964. Following the 1967 war, she spent 23 years defending Palestinians, most often unsuccessfully. Burnt out, and claiming the military justice system had become a farce, she left Israel in 1990 for a self-imposed exile in Tübingen, Germany, where she continues to this day to denounce the occupation. Here, as in Israel, she is attacked by other Jews who accuse her of treason and threaten her with death.

In 1990, Felicia Langer traveled to Stockholm to receive the Alternative Nobel Peace Prize for "exemplary courage in her struggle for the basic rights of the Palestinian people;" in 1991 she was awarded the Bruno Kreisky Award for Outstanding Achievement in the area of Human Rights; in 2005, she received the Erich-Mühsem Prize for her continuous service to the Palestinian people.

Like Burg, Langer has been telling the western world that its images of Israel as a "democratic" country and of Israel's occupation of Arab lands as "among the most benevolent" are false. Her message to Israelis is spelled out in the title of one of her



Felicia Langer

books: "Israel Is Losing Its Soul."

* * *

Once the military junta took over, they came for him. On the walls of the interrogation room hung swastikas and a picture of Hitler. "Are you a Jew?," they taunted him. "Yes," he said. "Are you a Zionist?" "Yes," he replied. Blindfolded, his hands secured behind him, his body jerked from the electric shocks, as his torturers chanted "Jew!... Jew!...Jew!...Jew!"

The Jew was Jacobo Timerman, the year 1977, the place Argentina. And more than likely he would have ended up among the estimated 30,000 "disappeared ones" were it not for the fact that he was founder and editor of Buenos Aires's influential daily, *La Opinion*. President Carter pressed the junta for his release and, after a 30-month ordeal, he was freed and deported to Israel in 1979.

For Timerman, the passionate Zionist, this was one of the reasons for Israel's founding: to be a refuge for Jews all over the world from state-sponsored anti-Semitism.

But there was also a second reason. For him the Jewish State was also to be a model of righteousness. And it was this part of the social contract he saw betrayed in Israel's preemptive 1982 invasion of Lebanon, ostensibly to eliminate Palestinian strongholds.

He aired his criticism, as coincidence would have it, in the pages of *The New Yorker*. Prime Minister Begin, he wrote, was a "terrorist" and "unbalanced" and "a disgrace to the people," and he accused Defense Minister Ariel Sharon of helping to make Israel "the Prussia of the Middle East." Like Avraham Burg, he called upon American Jews to help save Israel from itself. "It is possible that only the Jewish people outside Israel can now do something for us. There are Diaspora Jews who have kept the values of our moral and cultural traditions, which now have been trampled here by intolerance and nationalism... It may help those of us who are in Israel to cure the sickness that is destroying Israel."¹

Back in Israel, Timerman was vilified by fellow Jews who questioned his ethics. His son, Danny, became the first Israeli soldier to express conscientious objections to serving in Lebanon and, in his father's

words, "went to jail twice because he would not act as a jailer in Lebanon."

Increasingly, Jacobo Timerman felt like a non-person not only in Israel but on the lecture circuit in the United States. "People like me," he told Richard Curtiss of the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, "do not have a chance in Israel because you [the U.S.] support the other kind."²

In 1984 Timerman returned to Argentina, where his testimony against former military leaders was instrumental in the prosecution of human rights cases. He died there, in his home country, in 1999.

* * *

Avraham Burg, Felicia Langer, and Jacobo Timerman all saw present-day Israel as having fallen from a state of grace, from an age of innocence that existed back in 1948, when the founders of the Jewish state, with a purity of arms rarely seen in military combat, fought heroically for their independence. Not so Ilan Pappé.

Born of German-Jewish parents who had escaped Hitler's Reich, Pappé attended Hebrew University in the 1970s where, in its Middle East History Department, he was exposed to the plight of the Palestinians. He received his doctorate degree in 1984 from Oxford University. It was during these years he came upon newly declassified material in Israeli archives that challenged many of the foundational assumptions held by Israelis about their 1948 war of independence. He came to the conclusion that what happened in that war amounted to ethnic cleansing.

Pappé went on to teach at Haifa University, where he began publishing his findings, including a well received, and frequently requested article in our January-March 1998 issue of *The Link*. But it is in his latest book, "The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine," where he describes, in raw detail, the premeditated crimes committed by Israel's founding fathers.

His narration begins on March 10, 1948, in a Tel Aviv residence called the "Red House." This was the headquarters of the Hagana, the main Zionist underground militia in Palestine. Here on a cold Wednesday afternoon, 11 veteran Zionist leaders, together with young military Jewish officers, put the final touches to what they called Plan D, the plan for eth-

nic cleansing. Pappe writes:

That same evening, military orders were dispatched to the units on the ground to prepare for the systematic expulsion of the Palestinians from vast areas of the country. The orders came with a detailed description of the methods to be employed to forcibly evict the people: large-scale intimidation; laying siege to and bombing villages and population centers; setting fire to homes, properties and goods; expulsion; demolition; and, finally, planting mines among the rubble to prevent any of the expelled inhabitants from returning. Each unit was issued with its own list of villages and neighborhoods as the targets of this master plan.³

Once the decision was taken, it took six months for Plan D's implementation. In the end, close to 800,000 men, women and children—more than half of Palestine's native population—had been uprooted, and 531 towns and villages had been destroyed. Israel would have its Jewish State.

Like Burg, and Langer, and Timmerman, Pappe has fiercely condemned the occupation. Unlike them, however, he has concluded that the settlements now are so pervasive as to render any Palestinian state non-viable. The only just resolution, he argues, is one state, with one person, one vote, as happened in apartheid South Africa. This, he acknowledges, would spell the end of Israel as the Jews' state.

To this end, Pappe calls for the imposition of economic sanctions on Israel in the spirit of the boycott against South Africa. Furthermore, he extends that to include a boycott of Israel's Bar-Ilan and Haifa University professors who have not condemned Israel's occupation policy. This is a contentious stand, and he takes it, he says, for two reasons: One, like the German academics before them, who kept silent during the Nazi period, Israeli academics, by their silence, have allowed the atrocities against the Palestinians to continue for over 50 years. Secondly, Israel's academia provides the moral infrastructure for the occupation, and key members of it assist in its daily operation.⁴

It was the last straw. University President Aharon Ben-Ze'ev called on Pappe to resign, saying "it is fitting for someone who calls for a boycott of his university to apply the boycott to himself."⁵

In 2007, Dr. Ilan Pappe left Haifa University because, he claimed, he found it "increasingly difficult to live in Israel." He now chairs the history department at the University of Exeter in England.⁶

Palestinian Violence

Israel, having ceased to care about the children of Palestinians, should not be surprised when they come washed in hatred and blow themselves up in the centers of Israeli escapism. They consign themselves to Allah in our places of recreation, because their own lives are torture. They spill their own blood in our restaurants in order to ruin our appetites because they have children and families at home who are hungry and humiliated.

—Avraham Burg, International Herald Tribune, Sept. 6, 2002

To appreciate what Burg is saying here, one need only consider the reaction of Mayor Rudy Giuliani to Prince Al Waleed bin Talal. The Saudi prince had given the mayor a check for \$10 million to help with the 9/11 relief effort, then, shortly after visiting ground zero, he suggested that the United States should change its policy toward the Palestinians. The mayor called the comment "highly inappropriate and very, very dangerous"—and returned the \$10 million.

But there are Israelis who would have told the mayor the same thing, in even more explicit language. Here's one:

The initiators of the attacks decided to implement their plan after America has provoked immense hatred throughout the world. Not because of its might, but because of the way it uses its might... It is hated by millions of Arabs, because of its support for the Israeli occupation and the suffering of the Palestinian people. It is hated by multitudes of Muslims, because of what looks like its support for the Jewish domination of the Islamic holy shrines in Jerusalem.⁷

This same writer is equally blunt about the reasons Palestinian suicide bombers detonate themselves in Israeli restaurants and pizza parlors:

When tanks run amok in towns, crushing cars, destroying walls, tearing up roads, shooting indiscriminately and causing panic amongst a whole population, it induces rage and creates suicide bombers. When soldiers crash through a wall into the living room of a family, terrifying them, ransacking their belongings, destroying a lifetime's hard work, and then continue into the next apartment and wreak havoc, it induces rage and creates suicide bombers.⁸

The writer is Uri Avnery. German-born, he came to Palestine in 1933. Five years later, at age 15, he joined the Jewish terrorist group the Irgun. Four years later, he left the Irgun because he didn't like planting bombs in Palestinian markets. He fought in the Samson's commando unit during the war of 1948, and during the 1950s and 1960s he edited Israel's leading alternative-media publication. In 1965 he was elected to the Knesset, where he served, off and on, until 1981. The next year he became the first Israeli to meet publicly with Yasir Arafat. In 1993, he founded Gush Shalom, the Peace Bloc, which calls for the dismantling of Jewish settlements and the founding of a viable Palestinian state. In 2006, Baruch Marzel, a West Bank settler, called on the Israeli military to carry out a "targeted killing" against Avnery.

To those who question his credentials on the subject, Uri Avnery, now 84, says simply: "You can't talk to me about terrorism, I was a terrorist."⁹

* * *

Another writer on Palestinian violence is Tanya Reinhart, an Israeli linguist who taught at Tel Aviv University. In 2003, following the outbreak of the second intifada, she wrote: "The debate about IDF [Israel Defense Forces] operations in the territories revolves around the question of whether terror can be wiped out by that means... There is a simple solution to the terrorism of suicide bombers—to leave the territories immediately and to give the Palestinians a reason to live."¹⁰

A year later, in March 2004, she went further:

During its 37 years of occupation, Israel has already violated every article of the Geneva Convention... The Israeli army blocks all options of non-violent resistance from the Palestinians... It is hard not to get the impression that terror is convenient for Sharon and the army. It enables them to convince the world that the Geneva protections do not apply to the Palestinians, because they have terrorists in their midst, and that, therefore, it is permitted to do anything to them... Under the military rule, Israel has become a leading force in the destruction of the very protections that humankind has established, out of World War II, for its own preservation, protections that we too may need one day, as history has already shown us.¹¹



Tanya Reinhart

In December 2006, Tanya Reinhart moved to New York explaining that she could no longer live in Israel due to its treatment of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories.

She died there, three months later, at age 63.

U.S.-Israeli Relationship

I don't like it [financial aid from the U.S.]. A state like mine should live on its own means.

Can you imagine the European Union with a lobby or a PAC for the Knesset? Maybe that was O.K. in the early fifties, but today I don't need it.

— Avraham Burg, *The New Yorker*, July 30, 2007

Unlike the previous Israelis we have profiled, Matti Golan is right of center in his politics. Like Avraham Burg, however, he has caustic things to say

about U.S. aid to Israel, be it from Congress or from private Jewish foundations. First off, it's not all that much, he argues; secondly, it turns Israeli Jews into clowns who are quite willing to perform handstands in order to milk the American money machine; and thirdly – and most insidiously – it makes U.S. Jews a greater danger to Israel than even the P.L.O.

Here is Golan on Jewish-American donors to Israel:

The main reason you send money, it seems to me, is that you still don't feel safe in the country you live in... I'm your insurance company, and you make your payments to me just as you do on your car insurance, your home insurance, your life insurance.¹²

And here is Golan on American Jews who are non-Zionist and have no intention of emigrating to Israel:

I prefer the declared non-Zionist ... at least they're telling me the truth, which is more than can be said for your professional breast-beaters who cry on my shoulder how hard it is for them to have to stay in America.¹³

His greatest scorn, however, is reserved for those professional breast-beaters who make a business out of pitching for Israel. Among these he singles out Holocaust survivor and Nobel Prize winner Elie Wiesel:

You're a prominent intellectual, you're a welcome guest in the homes of presidents and tycoons, you get paid handsome fees for your lectures. Suppose, perish the thought, that we [a proposed committee on Jewish emigration] actually ended with a call to settle in Israel – what would you do then? You would be expected to go first, which is the last thing in the world you want to do.¹⁴

Golan is the former editor-in-chief of *Globes*, Israel's leading business newspaper, and *Ha'aretz*, one of its leading dailies. He agrees with Burg that hundreds of thousands of Israelis have left the Jewish state since its founding, 10 to 15 per cent of whom are scientists, doctors, engineers, computer experts, and other hi-tech professionals. And many come to

America. Why? Because in America they're not called to reserve duty, their children don't have to serve in the army, they don't have to give half of their earnings to income tax, and they don't have to put up with the "existential problems" of the settlements.

What Israel needs from the U.S., says Golan, are for two million of its Jews – men, women and children – to immigrate to the Jewish State. That they don't undermines the very security of the state. Indeed, he argues, Israelis would gladly give up American money in exchange for American manpower.

* * *

Tony Judt was born in London in 1948. Members of his father's family had been killed in the Holocaust, and both his parents were leftwing Zionists. At age 15 – in a move that would have pleased Matti Golan – Judt helped to promote the emigration of British Jews to Israel. Three years later, he went there himself to work on a kibbutz. Then, in 1967, when Israel mobilized for war, he worked as a translator for the Israel Defense Forces and drove captured Syrian trucks.

The experience changed him. Up until then he had believed in socialism and equality for all in Israel, Jews and Arabs. But up on the Golan Heights, he heard officers spewing "straight-forward anti-Arab sentiment." It was a side of Israel he would see more of, as hard-line, rightwing, often religious Jews claimed a real-estate pact with God. Judt found it all very ugly.¹⁵

Today, Tony Judt is Director of the Erich Maria Remarque Institute at New York University. Up until late 2003, he was also a contributing editor of the pro-Israel magazine, *The New Republic*, but he lost that position when he publicly called for the conversion of Israel from a Jewish state to a bi-national one with equal rights for all Jews and Arabs living in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Then, in 2006, in the *London Review of Books* of March 23, John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago and Stephen Walt of Harvard University wrote their 82-page article entitled "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy." In it they argued that U.S.

policy in the Middle East is driven by a pro-Israel lobby, the core of which “is composed of American Jews who make a significant effort in their daily lives to bend U.S. foreign policy so that it advances Israel’s interests.” As a result, the authors conclude, “the United States has a terrorism problem in good part because it is so closely allied with Israel.”

Avraham Burg, according to David Remnick who interviewed him for *The New Yorker*, is in substantial agreement with Mearsheimer and Walt. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), Burg charges, subordinates American policy to Israeli interests and, by so doing, radicalizes public opinion in the Arab world.

Tony Judt was asked by the *New York Times* to comment on the Mearsheimer-Walt article. He did so in its April 19, 2006 edition, where he concluded that “the essay, by two ‘realist’ political scientists with no interest whatsoever in the Palestinians, is a straw in the wind.” He predicted that “it will not be self-evident to future generations of Americans why the imperial might and international reputation of the United States are so closely aligned with one small, controversial Mediterranean client state.”

Tony Judt has paid a price for his writings on Israel, including death threats against him, his wife and his two young sons. “These people,” he told Graham Bowley of the *Financial Times*, “would call up my office and they would say, ‘Tell Tony Judt he had better not let his kids out on the street,’ or ‘Tell Judt this is Hitler calling and he says Congratulations.’”¹⁶

“Apparently,” concludes Judt, “the line you take on Israel trumps everything else in life.”

Peace Negotiations

Do you want a Jewish majority? No problem. Either put the Arabs on railway cars, buses, camels and donkeys and expel them en masse –

or separate ourselves from them absolutely without tricks and gimmicks. There is no middle part. We must remove all the settlements – all of them, and draw an internationally recognized border between the Jewish national home and the Palestinian national home.

– Abraham Burg, *The Guardian*, Sept. 15, 2003

The longer Israel delays in coming to terms with a sovereign Palestinian state, the more Palestinian society will radicalize and embrace maximalist, jihadi ideologies, and the more Israeli society will lose its moral sense.

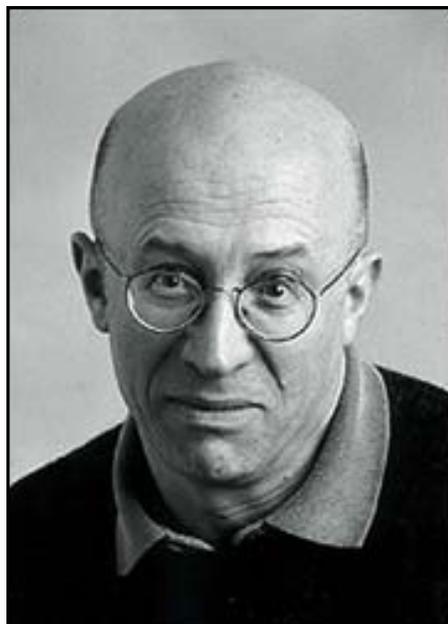
– Abraham Burg, *The New Yorker*, July 30, 2007

Gershon Baskin is a professional negotiator and peacemaker. Born in Long Island, New York, in 1952, he moved to Israel at the age of 25. For several years he worked to improve relations between Jews and Palestinians within Israel, then, following the outbreak of the 1987 intifada, he worked to foster cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

Today, Baskin is co-founder of the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI), an Israeli-Palestinian think tank located in Tantur, near Jerusalem, next to the main Bethlehem checkpoint.

Baskin calls himself a neo-Zionist. By that he means he supports a Jewish state, but sees its survival as possible only if Israel gives up the West Bank. In words as foreboding as those of Avraham Burg, he warns that the survival of the Jewish state will depend on who wins the fight: the settlers, with their messianic projects that are nothing less than an act of national suicide, or the 80 per cent of Israelis, who say let’s remove all the settlements, and let the Palestinians have their own state.¹⁷

The prospect of a renewal of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process offers Baskin some hope. Meanwhile, the reality of a growing number of settlements and the grotesqueness of the occupation are never far away. Earlier this year his daughter, who



Tony Judt

recently turned 18, informed her father that she had decided to refuse to serve in the army, because she refuses to support the occupation.

He told her he would visit her in jail.

* * *

Following the assassination in 1995 of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a rightwing Israeli Jew, Ami Ayalon, a former commander of Israel's Navy, was appointed head of the Shin Bet, the Jewish state's secret police. By his own admission, he has killed and tortured Palestinians, his favorite technique reportedly being to grab the upper jaw with one hand, the lower jaw with the other, and pull hard until the face breaks.¹⁸

When he left the Shin Bet in 2000, Ayalon was one of the most hated men in the West Bank and Gaza, although the level of Palestinian violence had dropped dramatically. The question for him was why did it go down. The answer he came up with would set him on a new path. The violence fell, he concluded, not because of anything he did or any information the Shin Bet uncovered. The reduction occurred once Palestinians perceived some progress was being made in the peace process. That is, once they felt a hope of achieving freedom, of less humiliation, and of having a better economy, at that point they no longer approved of terrorism as a legitimate tool.

This led, in June 2003, to the opening of "The People's Voice," a joint initiative by the one-time torturer and his Palestinian partner, Dr. Sari Nusseibeh, president of Al-Quds University. Their aim is to collect as many signatures as possible of Israelis and Palestinians who support a two-state solution, i.e., a Jewish state and a Palestinian state, with permanent borders approximating the 1967 lines (with land swaps so Israel can annex the major settlement blocs), the removal of the settlers from Palestine, Jerusalem as an open city and the capital of the two states, and with Palestinian refugees returning only to Palestine and Jews only to Israel.

Ayalon knows that time is running out on the two-state solution. "Most Israelis," he admits, "sign on to this plan because they hate Palestinians and do not want them in the country." He acknowledges

that "removing the settlements will be the most painful act since the creation of Zionism. The left cannot do it. The right lacks the courage." Yet, not to do it, he argues, would spell the end of the Jewish state and lead to more violence for both people.

Now 62 years old—he was born in 1945 in a kibbutz founded by his illegal immigrant father from Hungary—Ami Ayalon can be as straight-talking as Avraham Burg. Here he is on the Palestinian faction Hamas: "Should we speak with Hamas? They have blood on their hands. I have more blood on my hands... I killed more terrorists than they killed Israelis, and I say I have the right to lead any peace process."¹⁹

And, again, on Israeli perceptions of Palestinians: "Until we understand what a Palestinian child draws when he looks at an Israeli, what is the meaning of an Israeli soldier, what is the meaning of an Israeli checkpoint, what is the meaning of humiliation, we won't truly understand what they are going through."²⁰

And on Palestinian refugees: "We do not want the return of the refugees. But we can refuse only if Israel acknowledges its role in the suffering of the Palestinians and its obligation to help solve the problem."²¹

And, finally, on the quest for peace and justice: "As long as the Palestinian question is not resolved, the region will not know stability."²²

In 2006, Ami Ayalon was elected to the Knesset on the Labor ticket, but was not given a position in the cabinet when Labor entered a coalition with Ariel Sharon's Kadima party.

Enter Hitler

We have seen that much of what Avraham Burg has been saying has been echoed by other Jewish critics of Israel. The consternation surrounding Burg, however, stems not so much from *what* he says as from *who* he is. As the Jewish-American daily The Forward noted: "The fact that these words come from the mouth of a man born, fed and bred in the elite of the Zionist establishment created an uproar in the country. Some were angry, others were frightened, but observers from across the political spectrum agreed that Burg's comments marked a water-

shed moment in the history of Zionism."²³

Listen to Yoram Hazony, founder of the Shalom Center, a research institute in Jerusalem, for whom Burg is one "of the great leaders of Zionism;" he equates Burg's denunciation of Zionism to the pope announcing that he had converted to Judaism.²⁴ Zeev Bielski, chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel, accuses Burg of disconnecting himself from Israel and Israeliness by "besmirching life in Israel and denying that Israel is the center of the Jewish People and the object of the Jewish People's longing since its beginnings."²⁵

To appreciate such reactions, it helps to recall that Avraham's father, Yosef Burg, was the longest sitting member of the Knesset, serving under prime ministers from David Ben Gurion to Shimon Peres. It helps, as well, to recall that Avraham himself had a decade-long career in the Knesset, including four years as its speaker. Prior to that, he led the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency for Israel. As Chairman of the Jewish Agency, he oversaw the immigration to Israel of over half a million Jews.

Hence the title of The New Yorker article: Avraham Burg, "The Apostate."

We have titled our Link article, however, Avraham Burg, "Apostate or Avatar."

Avatar comes from two Sanskrit words meaning "down" and "he crosses over." In the Hindu religion it refers to the incarnation of a deity, from which we get the meaning of an embodiment of a concept, philosophy or tradition, usually in the form of a teacher. Popularly, the avatar both represents the complete anarchy of the values developed in a society and presages a new state of social development.

Burg, as we have seen, believes that today's Israel rests "on foundations of oppression and injustice," and that "the end of the Zionist enterprise is already on our doorstep." It is the new state, the one he sees replacing the classical Zionist state, that has led at least one member of the Knesset to try to prevent him, by law if necessary, from being buried in the section of the cemetery on Mount Herzl that is reserved for national leaders.²⁶ This new state, says Burg, may yet be Jewish, he says, but it will be different—it will be "strange and ugly."²⁷

It will be a lot like pre-Nazi Germany.

And here we come to the event that occasioned Burg's recent interviews, including his interview in The New Yorker: the publication this year of his book "Defeating Hitler." In it Burg argues that Germany in the 1930s was ripe for fascism because of its social paranoia and its social philosophy. And both of these conditions he sees present in today's Israel:

■ **Social Paranoia.** Following their loss in World War I and the humiliating way they were treated by the victors, Germans felt a sense of national insult, a feeling that the world was against them. When a strong leader came along who promised to restore their national pride and to confront their enemies, they were ready to forego individual rights. Thus the centrality of militarism crept into their national identity.

And so it is today with the Israeli national character, argues Burg. The horror of the Holocaust created a paranoia that sees every gentile as anti-Semitic; and 40 years of maintaining a brutal occupation have spawned a militaristic spirit and widespread contempt for universal norms. As settlers take ever more Palestinian land—and a 2007 report by the Israeli advocacy group Peace Now shows a pattern of illegal seizure of private land that the Israeli government has been reluctant to acknowledge, never mind prosecute—Palestinian violence increases, as Ami Ayalon, the former head of Shin Bet acknowledges. As violence increases, fear increases to the point where Israelis will elect as their prime minister the hardliner, Ariel Sharon, a man once convicted of complicity in the massacre of Palestinians, and they will willingly let him build a wall around their fortress state.

Meanwhile, a growing number of young Israeli professionals consider leaving their country. For good. Increasingly they are anxious about their children's security, tired of paying exorbitant taxes to support what they consider "religious parasites," and pessimistic about the future. No one knows how many Israelis live outside Israel, but seven years ago the number was estimated at 500,000, 300,000 of whom live in New York City.²⁸ At the same time, more religious, and often militant Jews are moving into "Judea and Samaria," the biblical names for the West Bank. And this fuels the vicious circle of illegal

expropriation of land, Palestinian violence, Israeli fears, and national militarism.

Matti Golan, as we saw, told American Jews he didn't want their dollars, he wanted their sons and daughters to move to Israel, to enlist in its army and to fight for its very existence. Avraham Burg in his book, however, suggests breaking the vicious circle by questioning Israel's Law of Return, an act equivalent to shutting off the blood supply to the Jewish state. This is the law Israel enacted in 1950 that grants Jews anywhere in the world, by the fact they are born of a Jewish mother, the "right" to immigrate to Israel on the grounds that they are returning to their own state, even if they have never been there before. That the man who facilitated the immigration of over half a million Jews to Israel now calls on Israelis to rethink the law that permitted them to return will not help his chances for a plot on Mount Herzl.

■ Social Philosophy. Nor will he be helped by his observation about Theodor Herzl, the creator of political Zionism and founder of the World Zionist Organization. Germans and Israelis, Burg writes, have this in common: "From the beginning, Max Nordau and Theodor Herzl were deeply influenced by the awakening of German nationalism."²⁹

Nationalism is usually divided into liberal and ethnic. Liberal nationalism, with its roots in the French Revolution, sees the state as constituted by its citizens, all of whom stand equal before the law. Ethnic nationalism, with its roots in German Romanticism, sees the state as belonging to a particular ethnic nation, members of which enjoy privileges denied non-members who happen to live in their state.

Herzl, who was born in Budapest in 1860 and became a Paris-based correspondent for an Austrian newspaper, at first embraced liberal nationalism. But following the outbreak of anti-Semitism at the time of the Dreyfus Affair, he concluded that authentic communities were formed not by legal bonds but by organic, mystical ties that precede and transcend the political. The problem for Jews, said Herzl, was they had completely lost their feeling of solidarity as a race; the solution, he concluded, was for them to carve out a state, which they would own, and which would override the interests of its non-Jewish population.³⁰

It is one of those ironies of history that now, 100 years later, Avraham Burg, former head of Herzl's World Zionist Organization, announces he has a French passport and lives in Paris. Not unlike Ilan Pappé who now lives in England, and Felicia Langer, who lives in Germany, and Tanya Reinhart, who moved to New York. And not unlike the families of former Israeli prime ministers David Ben-Gurion, Menachem Begin, and Yitzhak Rabin, all of whom have children or grandchildren living outside the Jewish state.³¹

They leave behind them a state that remains racially divided, with those of Jewish nationality enjoy-



Avraham Burg

ing benefits denied those of non-Jewish (read Arab) nationality. Even the blunt-speaking Ami Ayalon, who favors a Palestinian state, makes clear that the State of Israel should not be a state for all of its residents, that Israel is the state of the Jews, with a Jewish majority, that equality for Arabs and non-Jews is considered an internal issue that is hard to implement.³²

Avraham Burg sees a more worrisome specter. "There is a very good chance," he warns, "that a future Knesset in Israel will prohibit sexual relations with Arabs, use administrative means to prevent Arabs from employing Jewish cleaning ladies and workers ... like the Nuremberg Laws."³³

Indeed, the omens are there for those with eyes to see. I'm not that concerned, he told *The New Yorker*,

about right-wing hoodlums who write on our public walls "Arabs out" – like *Juden raus*, I worry about the municipalities that don't erase it.³⁴

During most of the writing of his book, Burg used the working title "Hitler Won." The Jewish state had lost its soul, he said, and I was in mourning.

By the time he came to the end of the writing, he had a new title: "Defeating Hitler." He made the change, he said, because he discovered that his illustrious father, who was born in Germany, had a vision that transcended ethnic nationalism. It was a vision of a new Israel in which every citizen, Jew and Palestinian, stands equal before the law. That vision will defeat Hitler.³⁵

So, the question remains: Is the father's son an Apostate or an Avatar?

Our answer: Both. ■

End Notes

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Eddy, W.	F.D.R. Meets Ibn Saud	2005	46	\$25.00	\$20.00	A reprint of the 1954 edition; limited number available.
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Karmi, G.	In Search of Fatima	2002	288	\$26.00	\$15.00	Poignant memory of Palestinian exile.
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