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Reinventing Zionism

RICK RICHMAN - 04.17.2009 - 3:56 AM

In his important new book, *Saving Israel: How the Jewish People Can Win a War that May Never End*, Daniel Gordis begins one of his chapters with a quotation from Israel Aumann, Israel's 2005 Nobel Prize Laureate:

[T]he greatest [threat] of all . . . does not come from Iran, nor from terrorist groups, nor from any external source. It comes from within us. . . . Without motivation, we will not endure. . . . What are we aspiring to here? Without [answers], we will not endure.

Like Aumann, Gordis sees a threat to Israel that's more serious than neighbors bent on its destruction: the inability of an increasing proportion of the citizenry to remember basic elements of Jewish history, to articulate why their country exists in the first place, and to comprehend the nature of their historic enterprise. This inability is itself an existential threat.

Gordis's book is an attempt to answer Aumann's question, written from the perspective of someone who in his lifetime has voted for both Jesse Jackson and Ariel Sharon. Raised in a suburban, Democrat-voting, liberal American household, Gordis moved to Israel in 1998 with his wife and three young children, at the height of the "peace process." A decade later — after a Palestinian terror war following Israel's offer of a state, a Lebanon war following Israel's complete withdrawal, and a Gaza war following Israel's removal of every settlement and soldier — he no longer expects peace now, nor perhaps (as his subtitle indicates) ever. But there are things more important than peace.

When he moved to Israel, his Israeli friends told him they could not understand how anyone could actually choose to leave the comforts of American life for a land where everything is "smaller, more expensive, more dangerous, and more tenuous." His answer: to live in Israel was to be at the center of Jewish history, to be part not simply of a prosperous democracy, but a Jewish state.

He discusses with extraordinary insight and sensitivity the issues a Jewish state raises with respect to a significant non-Jewish minority, some of whom actively wish it ill. He provides history and context that even those who consider themselves well-versed in Jewish culture and religion will find new. He calls for a new, informed Zionist discourse.

In world-historical terms, Israel was created on a silver platter that has tarnished from years of excessive respect for the "other," acceptance of competing "narratives" regardless of their basis in fact, indulgence in a post-Zionism that assumed history had ended, and secular and religious institutions equally in need of reinvigoration. Engaged in a war that cannot be ended simply by wanting peace, Israel needs to recover a sense of its historic role, and to live it. Gordis's book is a major contribution to that effort.

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