ISRAEL, PALESTINE, AND THE RETURN OF THE BI-NATIONAL FANTASY.
What is Not to be Done
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The time has come to think the unthinkable." It is almost an iron law of intellectual
life that any idea that is advertised as unthinkable has been thought many times
before. The promotion of an idea to unthinkable says nothing about the merit of the
idea; many "unthinkable" ideas are not worthy of serious thought. It is not the veracity
of the thought that the appeal to unthinkable seeks to establish, it is the courage of
the thinker. Only truly free minds think the unthinkable. The rest are shackled by
dogmas and sentiments and clichés and interests. The thinker of the unthinkable may
even envy the others their intellectual tranquility, but now "the time has come," he has
no choice any longer but to wound the others with the truth, to utter something bold
and new, to "speak out" or "tell truth to power" or otherwise indicate that the
unpopularity of his opinion is evidence for its correctness. Is it dissent? Then it must
be right.

If ever an idea was not unthinkable, it is the idea of a bi-national state of Israelis and
Palestinians. The fantasy is as old as the conflict itself. It has been thought and
thought and thought--by Jews in the late 1920s and early 1930s and by Palestinians
and Israeli Arabs during the last decade. Azmi Bishara, an Arab member of the
Knesset, propounded the notion in the early 1990s. Edward Said championed it in his
final years, as a way of maintaining his moral elevation without having to assent to
the finality of the other. Noam Chomsky has been virulently advocating an anarch-
socialist version of it for decades. Palestinian intellectuals and journalists in the
occupied territories and abroad have been discussing the blandishments of bi-
nationalism with increasing fervor in the years of this intifada. Even Thomas L.
Friedman, a creature of the thinkable if ever there was one, recently speculated on
CNN that "maybe there's actually a whole different framework here. Maybe we're
actually beyond the two-state solution anymore and we're now in a one-state solution.
OK, that either there is going to be a bi-national state in some way or there's going to
be, you know, some kind of ethnic cleansing." So we are not exactly in the kingdom
of advanced thought. But here is Tony Judt, in The New York Review of Books,
proclaiming that "the time has come to think the unthinkable," which is that "the
two-state solution--the core of the Oslo process and the present 'road map'--is
probably already doomed. With every passing year we are postponing
an inevitable, harder choice that only the far right and far left have so far
acknowledged, each for its own reasons. The true alternative facing the Middle East
in coming years will be between an ethnically cleansed Greater Israel and a single,
integrated, binational state of Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians."

J judt calls his article "Israel: The Alternative." But let us read strenuously. A bi-
national state is not the alternative for Israel. It is the alternative to Israel. Judt and his
editors have crossed the line from the criticism of Israel's policy to the criticism of
Israel's existence. The right in Israel and America are therefore greatly in their debt:
They have given credence to the suspicion that the criticism of Israel's policy is
always nothing other than the criticism of Israel's existence. They have taken the
heroic step of calling for the dissolution of the Jewish state.
What would Judt's bi-national state look like? He is not very forthcoming about its particulars. His imagination does not keep pace with his indignation. Such an entity, he says, would demand the presence of "an international force" and "the emergence, among Jews and Arabs alike, of a new political class." That is all. He does not acknowledge the most inexorable feature of his Levantine erewhon: that in a matter of a few years the demographic realities between the river and the sea would determine its social composition and its political character. It would be a Palestinian state with a Jewish minority: Greater Palestine. The Jewish minority in Greater Palestine would be small, I suppose; many Jews will have prudently emigrated to escape such an outcome. Unlike some other proponents of the bi-national state, Judt oddly does not elaborate any requirements that it be democratic and constitutional. Perhaps he is being realistic; but then he is being even more irresponsible. For what reasons do the Israelis have to depend for security and decency upon the democratic talents of the Palestinians?

Democracy is universal in theory, but it is not universal in practice. It must be seen to be believed. And the political culture of the Palestinians is now a contest between religious maximalism and terrorism and secular maximalism and terrorism. "Palestinian reform" is so far one of the cruelest disappointments of this disappointing time; but Judt would have the Jews of Israel cast their lot with it. The nightmare of ethnic cleansing in Greater Israel disturbs his sleep, but the nightmare of ethnic cleansing in Greater Palestine does not. Greater Israel means war, but Greater Palestine means peace. Will the jihadists of Hamas really stay their hands when Afula finally is theirs? And who will protect the Jews in Greater Palestine from their wrath? An "international force"? The suggestion is outrageous. The record of international forces in conditions of ethnic cleansing is a sentence of death for any people who would look to them for salvation.

Who by fire, who by water, who by professors. Judt has four reasons for his haughty and ugly proposal. The first is that Israel is an "anachronism." It "arrived too late," because by the time it was established "the world ha[d] moved on" from the nation-state—that "characteristically nineteenth-century separatist project"—toward "a world of individual rights, open frontiers, and international law," of "pluralist states which have long since become multiethnic and multicultural." Nothing original here, except perhaps the claim that the abolition of the nation-state should begin with the abolition of the Jewish nation-state. Another election of the Jews, I guess. But from the standpoint of the better world, why is Greater Palestine preferable to Greater Israel? More precisely, why is Greater Palestine preferable to Israel? (Greater Israel exists so far only in the plans and the hallucinations of the extreme right. It is wrong, but it is not real.) Judt has not replaced a national state with a postnational state; he has replaced a national state with another national state. He wishes to relieve Palestinian statelessness with Jewish statelessness, to exchange one vulnerable minority with another (even more) vulnerable minority. This, justice? The moral calculus of Judt's proposal is baffling.

J judt's history is also awry, which is unlike him. Israel was hardly the last or the latest nation-state to come into being. India and Pakistan were established at the same time as Israel. They, too, were born in violence and in partition. And the partition did not quell the violence. Was the partition of the subcontinent, therefore, a mistake? If it
was, why does Judt not demand also the dismantling of Pakistan? Moreover, the United Nations is swollen with post-colonial nation-states that were created since the late 1940s, whose moral authority in the General Assembly and the Security Council does not seem to be vitiated for Judt by their belatedness. But what is really perplexing is the extent to which Judt has fallen for the legend of globalization. The most excruciatingly obvious fact about the world today is surely the extent to which it is not "multietnic and multicultural" in the principles of its political organization. In economics and culture, there is an unprecedented porousness; but not in politics. Where is this beautiful cosmopolitan planet, this merrily deracinated family of man, in which Israel is the disfiguring exception? "A world of individual rights [and] international law"? Tell it to the Bosnians, the Rwandans, the Albanians, the ... well, he knows the list. We have heard a great deal in recent years about the necessary infringements of sovereignty in an increasingly interdependent world, and in a world increasingly marred by ethnic atrocities within the borders of multiethnic polities, but the infringements upon national sovereignty of, say, the European Union are not erasures of national sovereignty. France still exists, even if the franc no longer does. And the reason that France still exists is that it is founded on a national feeling, a collective subjectivity, which enjoys not only historical facticity but also moral validity.

This brings us to Judt's second reason for condemning Israel to disappear. He is offended by the ideal of belonging that it represents. "In a world where nations and people increasingly intermingle and intermarry at will; where cultural and natural impediments to communication have all but collapsed; where more and more of us have multiple elective identities and would feel falsely constrained if we had to answer to just one of them; in such a world Israel is truly an anachronism." These are all platitudes, more where-do-you-want-to-gotoday propaganda for the recent transfiguration of all things. Judt's eschatological satisfaction with our present circumstances is surprising. Have the impediments to communication collapsed? Only technologically; but the impediments to communication were never the same as the impediments to understanding. So far the intermingling of peoples has not delivered a golden age of tolerance: it turns out that everybody still does not wish to be like everybody else. Difference has been made mobile, not obsolete. And Judt's assumptions about identity are unexamined. His "more and more of us" is smug, and a little provincial. Who in the world answers to just one identity? What man or woman on earth is not afflicted by contradictions between loves and commitments and beliefs and desires? Who anywhere adds up?

In Judt's universe, there is either sampling or martyrdom. But a little reflection shows that the choice is not between the blessing of multiple elective identities and the curse of single exclusive identities. Strictly speaking, neither of those identities are actual. Individuals are never born into nothing, and what they are born into is never all that they are. Multiple elective identities are sometimes nothing more than a frantic shallowness, a consumerist attitude toward values and experiences; and single exclusive identities are sometimes the only avenue to significance and depth, and even to a proper appreciation of freedom. It would be more precise to speak paradoxically of multiple exclusive identities. Such identities are everywhere to be found--and in the Jewish state, too. Judt's characterization of Israel as "a faith-driven ethno-state" is wildly erroneous, a tendentious caricature. There are places in Israel that are hybridity heaven. (And there are places in Palestine where a little hybridity
would go a long way.) It is true that national feeling, which exists in abundance even in "post-Zionist" Israel, is a scandal for the hallowed fluidity that the contemporary catechism prescribes for human affairs, but there are worse scandals. It might even be argued that national feeling, and group membership, and the engagement with tradition, and the preservation of peoplehood—all in a critical spirit, of course, and diversified by alienation and other affiliations, and vigilant about the corruptions of self-love—is all another blow against the philosophical casualness of the age. Anyway, the problem of the spirit of the age is not a Jewish problem. Zionism is not the only "constraint" in the world. Judt does not explain why the rectification of identity hangs upon the rectification of Israeli identity.

But he provides a clue. His third reason for wishing to wake up in a world without a Jewish state is the most embarrassing, because it is embarrassment. I mean that Judt is embarrassed by Israel. And so Israel must be gone. What follows is a passage of the sort that I never thought I would read in my time, at this late date in the modernity of the Jewish people. I squirm and type:

Today, non-Israeli Jews feel themselves once again exposed to criticism and vulnerable to attack for things they didn't do. But this time it is a Jewish state, not a Christian one, which is holding them hostage for its own actions. Diaspora Jews cannot influence Israeli policies, but they are implicitly identified with them, not least by Israel's own insistent claims upon their allegiance. The behavior of a self-described Jewish state affects the way everyone else looks at Jews. The increased incidence of attacks on Jews in Europe and elsewhere is primarily attributable to misdirected efforts, often by young Muslims, to get back at Israel. ... The depressing truth is that Israel today is bad for the Jews.

Bad for the Jews! This is the parodic formula for a ludicrous degree of Jewish insecurity, an almost comical inner infirmity, and Judt is offering it, without irony, as a serious measure of the predicament of the Jews. The New York Review of Books: Is it bad for the Jews? I expect that Judt would recoil from such a vulgar question. But these are the terms of his own reflection. Judt does not like that he is caught in a web of implication. The behavior of the self-described Jewish state seems to have affected the way everyone else looks at him. I detect the scars of dinners and conferences. He does not wish to be held accountable for things that he has not himself done, or to be regarded as the representative of anyone but himself. It is disagreeable to be falsely represented by others. These are old anxieties. But there is a new source of relief, as Judt himself reports. There is the saving elasticity of contemporary identity. Why doesn't he simply delete his Zionism or his support for Israel from his inventory of multiple elective identities? Why must Israel pay for his uneasiness with its life?

The reason, I fear, is that Judt has misinterpreted the nature of the hostility that vexes him. Consider his predicament again. He finds himself "implicitly identified" with Israel's actions in, say, Jenin. But he was nowhere near Jenin. He killed nobody. Indeed, he is ferociously opposed to the killings, and to the policies of the Sharon government in the territories generally. All he has to do, then, is to say so, and then to express his anger at the suggestion that he is in any way responsible for what he, too, deplores. For the notion that all Jews are responsible for whatever any Jews do, that every deed that a Jew does is a Jewish deed, is not a Zionist notion. It is an anti-Semitic notion. But Judt prefers to regard it as an onerous corollary of Zionism ("not
least by Israel's own insistent claims upon their allegiance"). He refuses to place the blame for this unwarranted judgment of himself upon those who make it. Instead he accepts the premise of the prejudice, and turns on Israel. He makes a similar mistake in his evaluation of "the increased incidence of attacks on Jews in Europe." He knows that they are "misdirected," but still he describes them as "efforts, often by young Muslims, to get back at Israel." In what way, exactly, is the burning of a synagogue a method for getting back at Israel? In the anti-Semitic way, plainly. It is the essence of anti-Semitism, as it is the essence of all prejudice, to call its object its cause. But if you explain anti-Semitism as a response to Jews, and racism as a response to blacks, and misogyny as a response to women, then you have not understood it. You have reproduced it.

And bad for which Jews? Surely Israel is not bad for the Jews of Russia, who may need a haven; or for the Jews of Argentina, who may need a haven; or for the Jews of Iran, who may need a haven; or for any Jews who may need a haven. Judt's conception of the superfluity of the Jewish state is to a certain extent premised on his good fortune as a Jew. But the haven that other Jews may require is premised upon the perpetuation of a Jewish majority in the Jewish state, which is why the Zionism of numbers has always been more urgent than the Zionism of borders. (The Likud and the settlers movement have madly jeopardized the Zionism of numbers with the Zionism of borders.) This poses the problem of the tyranny of the majority, obviously; but this, too, is not a problem that is unique to the Jewish state. If the rights of the Arab minority in Israel are not scrupulously respected and vigorously enforced, then the Jewish state will have betrayed its liberal principles, but there is nothing in the ethnic composition of this majority that makes such a betrayal inevitable. Any majority may behave justly or unjustly toward any minority.

The final reason for Judt's scheme is despair. This it is not difficult to dignify. The savagery of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is so shocking and so unabating that it hurts a peaceable mind. "The Middle East peace process is finished," Judt begins. "It did not die: it was killed." And he asks: "Have we reached the end of the road? What is to be done?" He is not alone in his mood of hopelessness, in his desperation for a solution. But he has forgotten the dangers of desperate solutions, and adopted one. It is necessary to note that in other hands the elegy for the peace process does not have the integrity of sorrow and the turn to a bi-national state does not have the integrity of despair. The Palestinians who espouse binationalism are acting on their fondest and most uncompromising dreams. It is their device for defeating Zionism and gaining dominion over the entirety of the land, the shrewdest form of the Palestinian rejection of the idea of partition.

It is worth remembering, then, why partition was, and still is, the only admirable answer to the question of Palestine. The idea of partition does not deny the rights to the land of Israelis or Palestinians. Quite the contrary. It represents a recognition of the moral arguments of both sides. But it proceeds wisely to a suspension of the moral argument, because there is no such thing as a right to a half, the right to Tel Aviv is indeed the right to Nablus and the right to Nablus is indeed the right to Tel Aviv, and so the appeal to rights is always a prescription for national frustration, for a one-state solution, for domination, for war. But the idea of partition, the two-
state solution, does not deny the nationalisms and it does not pander to them. It limits the fulfillment of the one only by the fulfillment of the other. It transforms the problem—the sharing of the land—into the solution. It insists that fairness is a variety of justice. And that variety is not Greater Israel with a Palestinian minority (or worse, a Palestinian majority) or Greater Palestine with a Jewish minority, but Israel and Palestine.

As the poet says, "two buckets were easier carried than one." Is the restoration of Jewish homelessness, and the vindication of Palestinian radicalism, and the intensification of inter-communal violence, really preferable to the creation of two states for two nations? Only if good people, thoughtful people, liberal people, do not keep their heads. But these are deranging days.

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