

GLOBAL

Tony Judt's Final Word on Israel

By Merav Michaeli

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In this interview just before his death last year, the historian discusses his controversial views on Israel, the country's future, and a life of disputation



Undated photo of Tony Judt / AP

In July 6, 2010, one month to the day before his death, I sat down with the British historian Tony Judt in his New York study to film an interview. He was positioned in a special bed in which he spent much of his time, completely immobilized by amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease. The interview was part of a larger film project, with director Gaylen Ross, about Israel and the U.S. and American Jewry. It was, for me, a profound and deeply personal

conversation.

Despite his illness, Judt agreed to let me interview him over email as well. What follows here is our lengthy conversation, conducted over several emails. As an Israeli who is deeply distressed by the state of my country, and as a journalist who feels more and more helpless in trying to bring change through my work, I felt a strong intellectual and emotional propinquity to Judt. We share similar views and perspectives about Israel. Between the two of us, he was the grown-up, he was the celebrated historian; I admit I was hoping for answers.

Before I left the filmed interview, I asked Judt how he would act, and what he would do, if he were today an Israeli Jew, teaching at Tel Aviv University, thinking the way he does, publishing the things he writes?

"I don't think I would have done anything different from what you and my other colleagues from Haaretz and academia are doing" he said, "History always happens to us and nothing ever stays the same." And then I had to go.

A year has now passed. Israel is enduring a social upheaval that gives some hope for change, but its relationship with Turkey and Egypt are in severe crisis, the Palestinians are working on a unilateral independence declaration to present at the UN, and former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates called Prime Minister Netanyahu an ungrateful ally to the U.S. and a danger to Israel. Reading Judt's words in light of the events, feels like reading a chilling prophecy. Our exchange started about two weeks following Israel's controversial raid on a Gaza-bound aid flotilla.

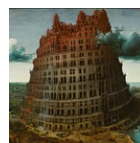
How do you see Israel's actions in the Flotilla affair?

The characterization that comes to mind is "autistic." Israel behaved in a way that suggests it is no longer fully able to estimate, assess or understand the way other people think about it. Even if you supported the blockade (I don't) this

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would be an almost exemplary case of shooting oneself in a painful part of the anatomy.

Firstly because it alienates Turkey, who Israel needs in the longer run.

Secondly because it was

undertaken in international waters

and largely at the expense of civilian victims. Thirdly because it was an overreaction.

Fourthly because it had the predictable effect of weakening the case for a blockade rather than strengthening it.

In short, this is the action of a country which is fast losing touch with reality.

The raid on the flotilla was far from being the worst of Israel's behavior over 40 years of occupation, yet the international response to it was the most grievous. Why do you think that is?

I agree. But what happens in small West Bank towns, in the Israeli Parliament, in Gazan schools or in Lebanese farms is invisible to the world. And Israel was always very good at presenting the argument from "self-defense" even when it was absurd. I think that Israel's successful defiance of international law for so long has made Jerusalem blind and deaf to the seriousness with which the rest of the world takes the matter.

"The identification of Israel with Auschwitz (and of its enemies with Nazism) is not only obscene, but self-defeating"

Finally there is the question of cumulation. From the Six Day War to Lebanon, from

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Lebanon to the settlements, from the settlements to Gaza, Israel's credibility has steadily fallen - even as the world's distance from Auschwitz (the favorite excuse) has lengthened. So Israel is far more vulnerable today than it would have been twenty five years ago.

What do you tell those who say Israel has willingly withdrawn from Gaza and everything that has happened since proves the Israeli claim that there's no partner for an agreement?

I tell them that they are talking nonsense, or else prevaricating. Israel withdrew from Gaza but has put it under a punishment regime comparable to nothing else in the world. That is not withdrawal. And of course we all know that there are those who would like to give Palestinians "independence" but exclude Gaza from the privilege. That too was part of the purpose of the withdrawal.

There is a partner. It may not be very nice and it may not be very easy. It's called Hamas. In the same way the provisional [Irish Republican Army] was the only realistic "partner for peace" with whom London could negotiate; Nelson Mandela (a "terrorist" for the Afrikaaners until his release) was the only realistic "partner for peace"; the same was true of "that terrorist" ([according to Winston] Churchill) Gandhi; the well-known "murderous terrorist" Jomo Kenyatta with whom London fought a murderous war for five years before he became "a great statesman"; not to mention Algeria. The irony is that Washington knows this perfectly well and expects negotiations with Hamas within five years. After all, Israel virtually invented Hamas in the hope of undermining the PLO; well, they succeeded. But they are the only ones who can't see what has to happen.

You advocated for a binational state. What does your binational state look like? How does it work?

I don't know. What I do know is that since I wrote that in 2003, everyone from Moshe Arens through Barak to Olmert has admitted that Israel is on the way to a single state with a potential Arab majority in Bantustans unless something happens fast. That's all that I said in my essay.

But ok, since it looks as though Israel is determined to give itself this future, what will it look like? Hell. But what could it look like? Well, there could be a federal state of two autonomous communities -- on the Swiss or Belgian model (don't tell me the latter doesn't work -- it works very well but is opposed by Flemings led by people very much like [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu and [Foreign Minister Avigdor] Lieberman). This could have crossover privileges and rights for both communities, but each would be autonomous. I think this would work better than a mixed single-state, and it would allow each community to set certain sorts of religious and other regulations according to its taste.

If it could look so good, why would it be hell?

Because it would start from a very bad place. It would begin with Jews running the place in the name of a Jewish state, defined by Orthodox Rabbis and controlled by an army whose officer core is increasingly permeated by religious and settler communities. No Arab would feel remotely safe, much less equal or a citizen in such a "single state". The Arabs' lack of property, rights, status and prospects would either make them a sullen and potentially violent underclass or else the best of them would try to leave. This is no good basis for integration, though it is of course what some of Israel's present leaders privately desire. And then there would be Gaza...

And if Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak and former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert also recognize that Israel is on its way to a single state with an Arab majority, why do you think they aren't doing what needs to be done?

Of Barak I will not speak. He is now a senior minister in what I regard as close to a neo-fascist government. If he has chosen that direction, then obviously he has no interesting or ethically defensible plans of his own. He is an object of contempt in my eyes.

Olmert, who seems to have reached my conclusions by his own path, suffers from being a typical tactician, and lacking strategic vision or political courage. He is not as bad as Shimon Peres in this and other respects -- Peres seems to me the most disappointing and in some ways damaging politician in Israel's history -- but he will

not stand up to the soldiers or the settlers or the rabbis and therefore he is not interesting as a candidate for real change.

In such a state, Jews would soon be a minority. Doesn't that frighten you?

Not as much as it seems to frighten others. Why is it ok for a Jewish minority to dominate an Arab majority, its leaders to call for expulsions of majority members, etc., but not ok for a democracy to have a majority and minority both protected under law? At least Israel could then call itself a democracy with a clear conscience.

What you are really asking is whether I think the Palestinians would immediately set out to rape, pillage and murder the Jews? I don't see why they would want to -- there is no historical record suggesting that this is what Palestinians do for fun, whereas we have all too much evidence that Israelis persecute Palestinians for no good reason. If I were an Arab, I would be more afraid of living in a state with Jews just now.

Can you see or understand why Israelis are afraid?

Yes, but only in the sense that someone who has been brought up to fear and hate his neighbors will have good reason to be frightened at the thought of living in the same house with them. Israelis have created a generation of young Palestinians who hate them and will never forgive them and that does make a real problem for any future agreement, single- or two-state.

But Israel should be much, much more afraid of the Israel it's creating for itself: a semi-democratic, demagogic, far-right warrior state dominated by racist Russians and crazed rabbis. In this perspective, an internationally policed and guaranteed federal state of Israel, with the same rights and resources for Jews and Arabs, looks a lot less frightening to me.

Can you see why American Jews are fearful as well of that?

No. This is the fear of the paranoid hysteric - like the man at the dinner table in the story I wrote in the New York Review who had never been to Israel but thought I should stop criticizing it because "We Jews might need it sometime." American Jews

-- most of whom know nothing of Jewish history, Jewish languages or Jewish religion
-- feel "Jewish" by identifying unthinkingly with Auschwitz as the source of their special victim status and "Israel" as their insurance policy and macho other. I find this contemptible -- they are quite happy to see Arabs killed in their name, so long as other Jews do it. That's not fear, that is something between surrogate nationalism and moral indifference.

In your 2003 essay "Israel: the Alternative" you wrote that Israel was an anachronism. Writers in Israel were asking why you didn't offer France and Germany to give up this anachronistic model first?

Oh, come on! I did not say that nation-states were past their use-by date. I said that ethnically driven versions were. There is nothing in the constitutions of France or Germany that creates second-class citizens defined by religion, ethnicity or parenthood. There is nothing there defining who can and who cannot have certain jobs, live in certain places or marry certain people. If Israel looked like France or Germany in these respects, it would be a better place. By the way, until Germany gave up its 1913 law regarding citizenship defined by descent, I wrote very critically about it. But Israeli commentators would not know that -- they are fixated on their own obsessions.

In that essay, your portrayal of Europe seems somewhat idealized. Do you still think that "Christian Europe" is part of the past and that their evolving minority problem is indeed marginal?

I don't think I said that the minority problem was "marginal". Nor do I want to idealize Europe. I have written elsewhere that the failure of Europeans to welcome Turkey into the EU is a catastrophe -- for Turkey, for democratic Muslims everywhere, and for integration back in Europe itself. But once again, my Israeli critics don't read about anything else so they would not know my positions on this. If Europe fails to address the fact that most of its new members (excepting Poland) will be and are either secular, post-Christian, or Muslim in makeup, it will face a hard future.

And how do you see Europe's future, will it accept Islam and Muslims as an

organic part of it?

A complicated question. There is no one Europe on this issue -- unlike institutions or regulations, religion varies hugely. Some parts of Europe, mostly Western but not only, are virtually de-Christianised. There -- e.g. in England or parts of France or parts of Scandinavia -- the problem is re-introducing religion and religious identification into secular societies. Thus in Holland the anti-immigration party emphasizes its own tolerance compared with the intolerance of Islam.

Elsewhere, e.g. in Poland or parts of Italy, people are still actively Catholic. Paradoxically, this makes them more sympathetic to Islamic institutions -- priests and imams working together, etc. -- but averse to excessive dilution of their historic dominance.

"I suspect that in decades to come America (the new Rome) will abandon Israel"

The other problem is that most young Muslims are not Muslim (the same is true for almost all Bosnian Muslims). That is, they are as secular in fact as their white schoolmates. But because it is convenient for governments and administrators to classify them as Muslim, they often become so out of resentment. Thus there are many more "Muslims" in Europe than actually belong to a Mosque or practice Islam. They would be better identified by their point of origin -- Surinamese, Algerian, Senegalese, etc. -- than by religion. But European censuses don't allow for that.

The biggest impediment to integrating Muslims (real or imagined) to European societies is the loud rejection of Turkey. It says very clearly that European leaders think not in terms of democracy (else why allow Croatia to apply), nor corruption (otherwise Greece would not be a member) but religious tags: Turkey is mostly low practicing by Muslim standards, but it is unquestionably overwhelmingly Muslim. Its

unacceptability to Germany or France is a big, big mistake -- all across Europe it sends a message to the Muslim community: "you are not part of us".

Conclusion: on this score I am very pessimistic about Europe's prospects.

Do Jews still need a Jewish state, a haven from the world? Or is it a changed world in which it isn't necessary any more?

Some think they do, some think they don't. Israel would never have happened if it weren't for Hitler and keeping the fear of Hitler alive is part of what fuels ultra-Zionism. But the whole thing is a complete mystery to most of the rest of the world. To be sure, there is anti-Semitism everywhere. But even if we ignore the unquestionable fact that some of it is driven by Israel's behavior, it doesn't diminish just because there is a Jewish state and we have no reason to believe that Israel is a barrier to prejudice anywhere else.

The world has changed since 1939. But Israel is a fact and there is no point debating whether it should exist. However, like many, many Jews outside of Israel, I feel a declining sense of identification with the place: its behavior, its culture, its politics, its insularity, its prejudices have nothing to do with being Jewish for me and I know that is especially true of younger Jews, excepting ultra-religious ones. So even if things went wrong for Jews today, I don't think most of us would want to go and live in Israel.

You lived in Israel for about two years in all. Why did you choose to build your life elsewhere?

I found the place rather stifling. I think you have to be a very deep believer in the Zionist objective, or else a Jew for whom the presence of other Jews is absolutely crucial in your life. Otherwise the downsides of Israel -- its parochialism, its self-obsession, its resort to violence as a first solution to everything; all of these are far too much to bear.

I think that perhaps I was there at an odd time. On the one hand everyone was quite optimistic and rather left-leaning in my world, and the treatment of Israel's own Arabs was largely invisible to me; on the other hand it was a very small place in which

people seemed concerned with very small things -- or else they lived mentally in Europe and never really accepted the terms of life in a small Middle Eastern country that would sooner or later have to stop beating its neighbours and find a way to respect them as equals.

Finally I believe I got frustrated with my friends and colleagues who told me to abandon my academic plans (Cambridge, etc.) and help build Zion. Even in 1966 this seemed to me simply silly: reproducing a collective farm in Galicia, circa 1910, in the middle of the '60s.

How do you see the Iranian nuclear threat to Israel today?

Why are we so obsessed by this? If Iran attacked Israel with a nuclear weapon, the U.S. and Israel would wipe out large sections of that country. Tehran is a sophisticated place that knows this perfectly well. Most Iranians I know think that their president's obscene rhetoric is diversionary -- a way to sell himself as the spokesman for the Muslim "street". They don't like it and they don't back it. But they are proud and don't like being told that they alone in the neighborhood can't have nuclear autonomy: they are surrounded by nuclear powers (India, Pakistan, Russia and Israel, not to mention the American fleet). Why should they not feel paranoid? The nuclear threat to Tehran is far greater than the nuclear threat to Tel Aviv.

No one I know in Washington seriously believes that Iran is about to nuke Israel. They are far more worried that Israel is working up this implausible scenario as an excuse for another diversionary war.

There are good reasons to discourage Iran from a nuclear capacity - but the existential threat to Israel is not one of them.

Should Israel attack?

Only if it wants to destroy forever its credibility as a stable member of the community of legitimate states. We all know perfectly well that such an attack would have a limited impact on Iran's long term plans, but would solidify support for it globally while forever alienating Israel from the world. That seems a pretty lousy deal for Israel.

Iran is a Shi'ite state, which hates the Taliban and is good friends with countries we need, like China and Turkey. Israel should be secretly and eventually publically trying to get back on good terms with it. In the larger scheme of things, it is pretty incredible that Israel has deliberately set out to alienate those few Muslim lands which have a real interest in being friends with it.

The worst consequence of an attack on Iran -- an extreme form of Israel's foolishness hitherto -- would be the final alienation of American sympathy. Already major military figures like [David] Petraeus have gone on record as seeing Israel as a "strategic liability." Attack Iran and Israel becomes an intolerable burden upon America's increasingly fragile role in the world. This would be a very big mistake to make.

Why do you think Israel, as a state, still hasn't gotten over its existential fears, over its self-concept as "victim?"

Obviously it has not. But it has gone from genuinely believing itself to be threatened to exploiting that "threat" to serve unworthy and foolish goals. As a result, no one outside Israel takes seriously the threat to its existence, which is bad for Israel should such a threat ever arise. The identification of Israel with Auschwitz (and of its enemies with Nazism) is not only obscene, but self-defeating. Until 1967 it was semi-plausible, despite running counter to the equally self-serving image of "macho Jews" who would never "go like sheep to the slaughter." Since 1967 it is a ridiculous claim and looks it.

In your view, in the bigger picture, what is Israel's role and place in the history of the Jewish people?

My first response is that of Zhou En Lai when he was asked what was the significance of the French Revolution and replied, "It's too soon to tell."

Another perspective, the long one, would be to say that Israel is behaving very much like the annoying little Judean state that the Romans finally dismantled in frustration. This classical analogy may be more relevant than we think. I suspect that in decades to come America (the new Rome) will abandon Israel as annoying, expensive, and a

liability. This will leave Israel to its own resources or to making friends with anyone who will deal with it (as it once did with South Africa). That in turn will make it a very unpleasant place for Western liberals and democrats, who will loosen their ties with it. No doubt it will survive, but it will mean less and less to Jews elsewhere as people forget the original impulse and historical circumstances surrounding its founding.

As to the future of Jews in the diaspora, they (we) will once again be the predominant community (once again as in classical times). I think Israel will grow increasingly marginal for most Jews, though I don't quite know what their Jewish life will look like either in a secularized world. In a way, we may be entering a new Middle Ages where the only way to preserve Jewish cultural and religious traditions will be to live in separate ghetto-like spaces (gated communities) closed off from the surrounding majority. That is already the case in parts of America.

We are now about a year into the Obama era. Is President Barack Obama "good for the Jews?" For Israel?

Obama could have been good for Israel and Jews if he had followed through on his Cairo speech and original intentions. But despite expectations, he caved in to Netanyahu and is now bad for Israel in the sense that he does nothing to stop it behaving badly to its own detriment. By not following through on his appeal he let people down who had hoped for a new start. And by allowing Israel to continue with settlements, or protecting Israel at the UN, he has made more enemies in Arab lands. In that sense, the dynamic is not very different than it was before, except that the tone is more polite. And of course, his Afghanistan mess makes him look like Bush, albeit nicer. On the whole, I would say he has failed here.

After your binational state proposal, many felt the need to publicly denounce you, even famous liberals. How hard was this for you?

Not at all. Since people took to calling me "Belgian" as a synonym for "anti-Semitic European," or "Self-Hating Jew," I assumed that they had nothing very interesting to say. Since liberals would often say one thing to me in private but something different in public for fear of being thought "anti-Semitic", I never much cared about their

criticisms either.

On the whole I don't mind taking a minority view: I've always done this. And many of the people who slapped me down for my criticisms of Israel were enthusiastic supporters of the Iraq war. So I suspect I was on the right side twice-over. The only criticisms I took seriously came from Israel, from reasonable people who had good grounds for disagreement. I suspect ground is starting to open up in America, as people gently put their heads above the parapet and risk criticizing Israel without getting shot.

In recent writing and interviews, you relate a lot to your unique sense of a limited future. How has this changed the way you see history and current politics?

I don't think it's changed it at all, though it may have shifted the balance of my writings and interests. I don't think I have altered my views on history or politics, though of course given my circumstances I have to ration my contributions and try to focus on the things that either matter most or that I have the best chance of influencing.

Merav Michaeli is a columnist for *Ha'aretz*.

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