

Syllabus for History of Zionism and the Birth of Israel (Gateway Course)

The lectures on the History of Zionism and the birth of Israel should focus on continuity and change in Jewish cultural-historical and political history, which combined to create a sort of a “Jewish renaissance.”

Zionism is described by various scholars as a “revolutionary” development in Jewish history. Yet this course will incorporate Zionism into Jewish history not just as a political escape from European anti-Semitism, nor as a complete deviation from previous values and traditions, but as a selective continuation and interpretation of these values and traditions, accompanied with other inputs such as social-democracy, adopted by the main stream of Labor Zionists, Marxism and its criticism, liberalism and hyper nationalistic ideas and their criticism and other values and ideas adopted from 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries models.

Aspiring to convert traditional Jewish culture and social traditions into a modern way of life, Zionism could not be reduced to a study of history of ideas alone. Amongst its most important features was, and still is, the combination of Jewish ancient, if hidden during exile due to the rise of Christianity and of Islam of aspirations for the recovery of sovereignty in at least parts of the Holy Land, with the revival of the Hebrew language and culture based on the TANACH and mainly upon the visions of the prophets, plus the quest for giving Jewish values such as the sense of the “Chosen People” a secular meaning, or a new-old religious meaning.

Hence Zionists tried to allow Jews to remain Jewish without being religious, very much under the profound impact of Baruch Spinoza’s and his pantheism, and of the modern philosopher M.Y. Berdyczewski, or allow religious Jews to adopt an active way out of the Diaspora without divine intervention.

The “renaissance spirit” of the Founding Fathers of Israel was also a matter of behavior, or action, combined with lots of verbal and political polemics and infighting, so typical among the “Umanisti” of the renaissance itself. The obvious differences notwithstanding, the European renaissance and the Jewish renaissance shared the following qualities, among others, to an obvious degree:

First, the transformation the traditional focus on God and His obedience to man and his freedom to pursue hereto divinely dictated norms .

Second, the study of nature and social reality as legitimate and hence useful tools of aspiring for better individual and communal life.

Third, the obligation to teach, and act, rather than to limit one’s activity to studying alone.

Fourth, the Machiavellian notion that politics, or rather statesmanship is an art, necessary to be used properly, in order to survive in a cruel, changing, sometimes merciless world.

Hence the founding fathers of Israel combined their own, and other Jew's quest for a physical shelter, which sometimes seems to be the main rationale of Israel’s existence, with an active right to defend themselves and the Jewish community as a whole, which was missing in exile.

The combination of the past before the past of the Diaspora, i.e. the return to a homeland that was lost 2,000 years before, and the creation of a living condition in its nature, historical past, fauna and flora, and the present times with a focus on a better future proved, however, to be historically and psychologically unique, and must have yielded criticism from various sides.

At the same time, Israel's founding fathers were engaged in various domestic and foreign challenges, such as the Arab Rebellion of 1936-1939, with growing British

restrictions on free immigration into mandatory Palestine, culminating in the "White Paper" of May 1939, in which the Imperial Government gave up its obligation to create a "Jewish Homeland" in Palestine due to Arab pressure, with the various challenges of WWII and then with the Holocaust. The ensuing domestic dilemmas and pragmatic actions undertaken by the main stream, ruling Labor elite, the renegade terrorism undertaken by far Right groups and the use of force by the elected leadership against those groups were unique, when compared to other national liberation movements, but also created continued legacies dividing the Israeli society until today.

Another feature of the newly born, old nation was its unique status as a homeland and haven for every Jew that led to the quadrupling of Israeli society within two decades of the state's birth. Various waves of migration, starting with the German refugees from Nazi Germany in the 30's, the Holocaust survivors in the 40s, the Jews emigrating from Arab and other Muslim countries, all the way to former Soviet and Ethiopian Jews, next to the unique connection created between Israel and American Jews should be a vital part of this syllabus.

Finally, Israel's wars, starting with the 1948 War of Independence to the recent Second Lebanon War, the related occupation of the West Bank and Gaza the controversial settlements created therein and the resulting polarization of the Israeli polity should be given its due attention next to a short description of the related, system of government and its characteristics.

A discussion of the original Israeli culture, i.e. Israeli literature, poetry, dance and song, music, theater and film making should be given its due, if possible.

The related bibliography could be found in my syllabus for JUS 377, but must be shortened according to the decisions that should be made, how to incorporate the above into the larger gateway course.