



REVIEW ESSAY

ISRAELI TELEVISION'S FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY "TEKUMMA" SERIES: A POST-ZIONIST VIEW?

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In a series of three articles published in these pages, I tried to describe the post-Zionist phenomenon: an academic and cultural critique of Zionism from within Israel.¹ The three articles touched only slightly on the extent to which this critique has been disseminated in Israeli society and affected general attitudes toward the Arab world and the Palestinians. The screening of a recent documentary series on Israel's history, broadcast on the country's official television channel, provides one of the first opportunities to gauge the potential impact of post-Zionism on a wider public. The series, "Tekumma,"² has been proudly presented as the centerpiece of Israeli Television's efforts to participate in the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary jubilee.

A MIXED PICTURE

The name of the documentary is very much in line with Zionist mythology: "Tekumma" means the resurrection of the Jewish people on the redeemed land of Palestine. But this explicitly Zionist title is attached to a television program that in part conveys a post-Zionist message, or at least experiments with post-Zionist interpretations of major chapters in Israel's history. Certainly, I am not underrating the importance of the wrapping: the title is the framework within which the message is conveyed, and its presence blunts the sharper edge of post-Zionist criticism. Moreover, the post-Zionist views are presented within a traditional Zionist metanarrative that interprets the reality of Palestine as exclusively Jewish. But while the history is still told as a Zionist story, there are indications that there is a counterstory as well. The fact that the other side's story does not receive as much coverage as the Zionist one creates an imbalance that might dictate to the viewer whose story is more truthful. Still, the program on several occasions provides verification by Israeli participants of Palestinian claims. Indeed, at times even the narrator himself presents the Palestinian view as just, and in so doing leaves an ambiguous and probably confused impression with the viewers.

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The tension between the wish to retell the Zionist story on the one hand and the desire to be even-handed by presenting the Palestine view on the other takes different forms. Each segment is prefaced by a bombastically sentimental pro-Zionist monologue by Yehoram Gaon, one of Israel's most popular singers. A narrator then tells the story from a Zionist perspective, but the narrative is at times interrupted and challenged by eyewitnesses: Palestinians, Egyptians, Jordanians, and—for the segments dealing with Israel's conduct toward its Mizrahi citizens—North African and Iraqi Jews.

It is difficult to assess the ultimate effect of this ambiguity. All I can do is demonstrate the tension between conformity and criticism through concrete episodes of the series, leaving the readers to judge the relative weights of commitment to Zionism and commitment to fairness. Of course, the best would be for readers to view the program for themselves.

"Tekumma" has twenty-two segments, but I will deal here only with those relating to the subjects at the heart of the post-Zionist critique: the essence of Zionism, the 1948 war, and the treatment of Israeli Arabs and Mizrahi Jews in the early 1950s. The series is quite openly critical of Israel after 1967, but—as I mentioned in my earlier articles on post-Zionism—criticism of post-1967 Israel falls well within the legitimate Zionist discourse. Hence, these later chapters, which in fact are quite poignant and intriguing, are of less interest as examples of post-Zionism.

Although the historical picture of the pre-1967 events is still very much in keeping with what I previously described as the "Peace Now Syndrome" (i.e., cherishing the period before 1967 as blissful and just while attributing all Israel's wrongdoing to the 1967 occupation), the series reveals some significant cracks in this idyllic view. In general, the segments suggest that Israel was less moral in its conduct in 1948–49 than was commonly depicted, that it was discriminatory and abusive in its treatment of its Arab and North African Jewish citizens, and that it was aggressive toward its neighbors and inflexible when there was a chance of peace in the region. The post-1967 chapters show how the past conduct explains the present behavior and how these early characteristics continue in different forms to the present day.

There are also more mundane reasons for the different approaches in the various chapters and periods. Though the series had a general editor, each segment was written, produced, and directed by a different team. And while a committee of five well-known, mainstream historians acted as consultants for the entire series, the directors of the various segments tended to be far more critical and "post-Zionist" in their views than the consultants.

As the program is devoted to fifty years of Israel's existence rather than to the history of Zionism *per se*, the origins and essence of Zionism are hardly dealt with, and the references to the pre-1948 period that do exist are very much in line with the official Zionist version. Hence, by not dealing with the essence of Zionism (for instance, not examining Zionism as a colonialist project), the series' overall message is a far cry from the message that has

emerged from the works produced by the post-Zionist academics in the last decade or so.

ADDRESSING THE 1948 WAR

The two segments devoted to 1948 are important because they serve as an overture for the entire series. One of the consultants for these two segments was Benny Morris. He was not a chief consultant (i.e., a member of the consultative committee), but he is mentioned in the credits, and more importantly, one can feel his imprint. Some of the episodes described in the segments covering 1947 and 1948 read like passages from his seminal work, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*.³

The most important effect of Morris's involvement is the relative centrality accorded to the refugee problem in the historical discussion of the 1948 war. The refugee problem hitherto occupied only a very marginal part in the overall picture drawn by official Israeli historians. Not only does the refugee issue assume greater importance in the story presented here, there is also a discussion of why the Palestinians left their homeland. The answer given is "Morrisian" to a fault: half of the population fled, and half was expelled. The segments make no mention of Israel's traditional explanation for the exodus—a general Arab order for the population to leave. The program introduces the evidence through eyewitness; there are no historians, just participants. A few Palestinian witnesses mention their belief at the time that they could leave because they would later be saved by the Arab world, but none mentions a call or an order to leave. Most tell a story of outright expulsion and uprooting.

The segments also deal at relative length with the question of massacres. There is an admission that Dayr Yasin was not an isolated case. Other massacres are mentioned in general terms, though only Balad al-Shaykh is referred to by name. This is a far cry from Morris's detailed account of many other massacres and from what appears in collective Palestinian memory as described in seminal works such as Walid Khalidi's *All That Remains*. Still, an Israeli confession of atrocities committed in the past represents a breakthrough. In the course of the program, a senior Israeli officer uttered a sentence that has haunted me ever since. When asked about the "purity of arms"—that Israeli oxymoron born in the 1948 war—he shrugs off the question with a bitter expression on his face. Of course, he says, the Israelis could not have adhered to the "purity of arms" while fighting against the civilian population. Each village became a target, he said, and they all "burned like bonfires"—he repeated the horrid description "like bonfires" (*Hem Baaru Kemo Medurot, Kemo Medurot hem Baaru*). And in that fire, he admits, the innocent as well as combatants perished. As the program also very clearly conveys, until May 1948 there were not many fighters on the other side.

In one episode, the case of Haifa, which is based more on eyewitness accounts, one finds a more critical approach than can be gleaned from the

account in Morris's book, which talks about flight, not expulsion.⁴ But eyewitness accounts, together with rare documentary footage, show an act of expulsion in Haifa. The impression that it was not an isolated occurrence is reinforced by a tale about Golda Meir's visit to the city and her uncharacteristic shock at what had been done to the Palestinian population there. It reminded her, it seems, of pogroms and made her ponder for a brief moment about the Palestinian tragedy and particularly about the Zionist role in bringing about that tragedy.

Finally, on the 1948 war itself, the segments show how the houses of the Palestinian urban population were taken over immediately after their eviction or flight by Jewish immigrants. Not mentioned, however, is the story of rural Palestine, a major issue in the description put forward by Israel's "new historians" and documented in the works of Palestinian historians (as well as forming a major theme in Palestinian novels and poems). Hence, there is no reference to the obliteration of villages and the takeover of their lands either for existing Jewish settlements or for the construction on their ruins of new settlements, settlements that quite often bear Hebraized versions of the old Arab names.

Considerable footage was devoted to the peace efforts after the 1948 war, the very mention of which is a novelty of sorts. In the collective Israeli memory, nothing happened between the warring parties after the armistice arrangements. This writer, who was once attacked as a "deceiver" by one of Israel's leading historians for suggesting that Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, did not seek peace with the Arab world after the 1948 war,⁵ was therefore quite surprised to hear the narrator assert that this was indeed Ben-Gurion's position. Nonetheless, the same narration ends not with the view (held by Morris, Avi Shlaim, and myself) that peace was missed because of Israel's intransigence, but with Itamar Rabinovitch's claim that peace was "elusive."⁶

In sum, while these episodes relating to the 1948 war do reveal some of the findings of the "new historians" and show a desire to present the other side's point of view, it must be understood that these revelations and sensitivities are expressed within a general framework. They are not the main issue. The sequences deal mainly with the Israeli perception of the 1948 events. The viewer thus receives the Palestinian point of view and the Palestinian disaster in small doses compared to the mainstream Zionist interpretation of 1948.

The overall tone of the 1948 chapters is one of sadness. Melancholic music accompanies the series, and the Jewish eyewitnesses have been carefully chosen to present a unified tragic voice. In fact, as presented in the program, the 1948 war can be characterized first and foremost as a tragic event in the history of the Jewish people. This is a very different approach from previous documentary films which tended to look at 1948 as a miraculous year of joy tinged with sadness. But the sadness conveyed by "Tekumma" is not about the cruelty or futility of war, but about the need to sacrifice one's sons for the

homeland. In the same vein as Labor Zionism's moral assertion that what happened to the Palestinian people was a small injustice inflicted to rectify a greater injustice (the Jewish Holocaust in Europe), the final impression left by the series is that the main tragedy of 1948 is that which befell the Jewish community in Palestine. The Palestinian tragedy of 1948 is dwarfed by the personal stories of loss and bereavement on the Jewish side. Again like Labor Zionism's approach to the use of force—described as resorted to reluctantly in the face of Arab hostility—the films show a Jewish tendency to ponder the consequences of a just war, in the mode of the soldiers who “shoot and weep afterward,” to repeat the phrase that emerged as a major theme in various collections of conversations among Israeli soldiers after the 1967 war.⁷ One suspects that a different director could have chosen footage that would have shown triumphant smiles and warlike enthusiasm on the faces of Israeli soldiers after occupying and destroying yet another Palestinian village.

Moreover, there seems to be a clear method in the way the Palestinian and Jewish eyewitnesses were chosen. The eyewitnesses on both sides are supposed to represent the rank and file, ordinary people. In reality, this is not so. On the Israeli side, the witnesses are highly articulate, usually senior officers, who describe with great eloquence and sensitivity what they have been through. The Palestinian witnesses, on the other hand, usually old men, almost invariably Israeli Arabs (not one had actually lived all his life in a refugee camp), present clouded memories in often broken Hebrew, usually in slogans, and not always very coherently. This, I feel, is no coincidence. Even if unconscious, the selection represents a means of depreciating the Palestinian point of view. Had someone wished to do so, a very different impression of the Palestinian side could have emerged.

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TREATMENT OF ORIENTAL JEWS AND ARABS

The segments of “Tekumma” dealing with the 1950s, particularly the state's attitude toward the Jews from Arab countries and the Palestinian citizens of Israel, likewise present a partially “post-Zionist” view. The Zionist role in encouraging the local Jewish communities in the Arab world to leave for Israel is hardly touched upon, though the illusions spread by the Zionist messengers are sufficiently conveyed.

The main issue dealt with here is the absorption, or the lack thereof, of the immigrants after their arrival in Israel. The obviously lofty attitudes toward the newcomers on the part of the more veteran Israelis eloquently conveys their negative attitude toward anything “Arab”—an attitude soon translated into colonialist policies in education and welfare. The process of geographic, social, and occupational marginalization is strongly projected through the stories of individuals who eventually succeeded in carving out better lives

for themselves. So it is still, the message goes, the land of open opportunities.

There was one genuine piece of new evidence on this issue in the film. I think very few Israelis knew that the general compensation Israel received from Germany was unevenly distributed among Jewish citizens of the state. The reparations, as they were called, raised the average standard of living of the Ashkenazi Jews but did not help the Mizrahim at all, thus widening further the socioeconomic gap between them. An Iraqi Jew in the program tells how he noticed the material improvement in the public life in Tel Aviv—people wearing new clothing, more food in the stores, automobiles, new amusement places—whereas in his own neighborhood all he could see was stagnation and continued deprivation.

For me, the sentence in this segment on immigrant absorption that made the greatest impact, and which I think encapsulates the essence of the Mizrahi immigrant experience, was uttered by a Yemeni Jew who came to Israel in the 1950s. Reunited on the program with the Ashkenazi woman who had been her teacher forty years earlier, she asked why her teacher had chosen to work with such a deprived and marginalized group: “Was it because you were a Zionist or because you felt it was your obligation as a human being?” If this sentence does not contain a direct accusation of the inhuman face of Zionism, at least it questions the sincerity of those Ashkenazi Jews sent to help the immigrants from the Arab countries. In other footage, it appears that other Mizrahi Jews felt that the Zionist discourse concealed acts of manipulation and dishonesty in the face of their situations.

The segment on the Palestinian citizens of Israel, titled the “Opsemist” after Emile Habibi’s book,⁸ is by far the best segment of the entire series, the only one that does not play the game of “balancing.” Here, the director clearly did not feel compelled to show “another side” to the story of discrimination against the Arabs in Israel; the impression is given that there is no other side, that there were no extenuating circumstances to the abuse and maltreatment suffered during the eighteen years of “emergency rule” imposed on the Arab citizens (1948–66).

The viewers are exposed to the expulsion of villagers from their homes in the name of security considerations in the early 1950s. Military governors admit that they were kings who harassed with impunity on a daily basis the local population. What is missing from the analysis is the link to the present situation of the Palestinians in Israel. The chapter conveys a picture of an almost inevitable process of modernization and Israelization of the local Palestinian minority. The same eyewitness brought for the 1950s could easily challenge the implication of ongoing improvement in the 1990s. This segment, together with another on Israeli behavior during the intifada, provoked a political upheaval and caused the national singer, Gaon, to resign as introducer of the segments.

Interestingly, though “Tekumma” largely ignores the Zionist Right (it is the Zionist Left that is held responsible for the expulsions, massacres, dis-

crimination, and manipulations involving the Arabs), the Likud has been spearheading the protests against what it terms a "post-Zionist" program. Indeed, the Likud has now appointed itself guardian of national virtues, assuming responsibility for what the nation did and does. Thus, according to the minister of communication, Limor Livnat, all these deeds must be presented as just and moral. The new director of the Israeli Broadcast Authority, Uri Porat, promised to screen an additional four segments that would balance the "distorted" picture of the past presented thus far.

One of the reasons for the government's wrath is the fact that the program has enjoyed very high ratings. The video cassettes are selling well. Although the Ministry of Education has forbidden its inclusion in the curriculum, there is a growing demand from below, that is from high schools, for copies for the classroom or to show unofficially.

This increased interest is not surprising: adopting a wholly Zionist perspective on the past is not only anachronistic, but boring. Teachers and students alike wish for a refreshing angle—especially an angle that may give an answer to the question of why Israelis find it so difficult to rejoice on their fiftieth anniversary.

Indeed, it would seem that the Israelis have chosen not to celebrate the jubilee but instead to deliberate on the connection between their history and the present. The deliberation is painful and does not leave much room for rejoicing. It forces the Israelis to abandon the pious posture so dear to secular Jews as well as, naturally, to the religious ones. "Tekumma" brings out sharply the contrast between the program's name—"resurrection"—and the reality of a state after fifty years of existence—a reality that is unstable and insecure, since the Israeli state and society have failed to reconcile with the people whom they expelled, whose land they took, and whose culture they destroyed. It would take more than a television program with a mildly post-Zionist criticism to make such a reconciliation possible.

NOTES

1. Ilan Pappé, "Post-Zionist Critique on Israel and the Palestinians," Parts 1-3, *JPS* 26, no. 2 (Winter 1997), pp. 29-41; 26, no. 3 (Spring 1997), pp. 37-43; 26, no. 4 (Summer 1997) pp. 60-69.

2. Gideon Derori, chief editor, the Israeli Television, First Channel, 1997.

3. Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

4. *Ibid.*, 73-95.

5. Anita Shapira, *New Jews, Old Jews* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997), pp. 35-36 [in Hebrew].

6. Itamar Rabinovitch, *The Road Not Taken* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Avi Shlaim, *Collusion Across the Jordan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Ilan Pappé, *The Making of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1947-1951* (New York and London: I. B. Tauris, 1994).

7. See Young Members of the Kibbutz Movement, ed., *Siah Lohamim* [Conversations among soldiers] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1968).

8. Emile Habibi, *The Opsemist* (Tel Aviv: Mifras, 1978).