

To read Peter Beinart's [Twitter feed](#) over the past day is to (almost) get the sense that the publication of his "[Yavne: A Jewish Case for Equality in Israel-Palestine](#)" is an occasion of great intellectual moment, a breakthrough in Zionist thinking that might renew American-Jewish enthusiasm for a new, more moral Jewish project in Palestine. It is, of course, nothing of the sort. In almost 8,000 words, Beinart strings together an astonishing array of sleights of hand and misrepresentations that makes "Yavne" little more than a screed that is an insult to the intelligence of his readers. Beinart is a smart guy; he knows that for his readers to buy his thesis, it is important that they not know very much. Luckily for him, that is a safe bet.

Before embarking, it is worth noting that Beinart and I agree about a great deal. I share his deep frustration over the plight of Palestinian Arabs. I, too, worry about racism in Israeli society. I, too, want something big to change here. And we also disagree about a great deal. He thinks that Israeli ethnic cleansing of the West Bank is likely, I think (and pray) that is it essentially unthinkable. He discounts the threat of Palestinian terror; I suspect that living in Jerusalem, it is more of an issue for me than it is for him on the Upper West Side. He believes that most Palestinians accept Jews' rights to live in "Palestine"; I think the evidence is much more ambiguous, and suspect that hatred of the Jew runs far deeper in Arab society than he wants to admit.

But those are all substantive discussions that would require an honest exchange of ideas; all I seek to do in the paragraphs that follow is to illustrate how far Beinart's "Yavne" is from honest. A full analysis of the dozens of misrepresentations would require far more room than this platform allows, so that will have to wait (but not long). Instead, I will simply point to some of Beinart's more egregious sleights of hand to indicate what "Yavne" really is.

Beinart writes that "opposing a Jewish state means risking a second Holocaust ... fear of annihilation has come to define what it means to be an authentic Jew." Implicitly, he suggests that the place that the Holocaust has in American Jewish consciousness says something about how Israelis, too, think about their country's purpose. But it does not.

Beinart is correct that fear of annihilation is what for decades enabled many American Jewish organizations to "sell" Israel to American Jews, largely because of the guilt they felt over their inaction during the Holocaust and because selling that fear of annihilation didn't require that American Jews possess much knowledge about Judaism, Israel or the Jewish intellectual canon. He is also right that that strategy for selling Israel to American Jews is no longer working. But to assume that fear of annihilation is what motivates *Israeli* life is to illustrate how little he knows about Israel.

In fact, the miracle of Israel is that we no longer worry about annihilation. Of course, we have to be vigilant about Iran. Of course, we need to protect ourselves against Palestinian terror and Hezbollah's lethal arsenal of precision rockets that can hit every inch of Israel. Of course, we need to prepare ourselves for the possibility that the left wing of the democratic party will gain ascendancy in America and Israel will no longer be able to count on

America's support. It is true that we have had to cultivate what Johannes Fest, the German, conservative, Roman Catholic passionate anti-Nazi, called the Jewish "instinct for danger, which had preserved them through the ages."

Yet while we preserve that "instinct for danger," it is not the fear of annihilation that motivates Israel. Israeli children (excepting those who live near Hamas along the Gaza border) do not spend their lives wondering when the enemy will attack – the miracle of Israel is that those days are gone, that they're even hard to recall. Most of us have taken the hermetically sealed bomb shelters in our homes and drilled holes in the steel-reinforced concrete wall for washing machines and dryers, or air conditioning vents. It's against the law, technically, but we'd much rather have a laundry room than a place to hide. My wife and I have government-issued gas masks somewhere, but I couldn't begin to tell you where they are. We Israelis are not stupid or naïve, but it's not annihilation that motivates our lives in the Jewish state.

So what *does* motivate our lives? Israel is, for the Israelis who think about such things, a grand experiment in the cultural, intellectual, historical, linguistic and religious rebirth that can unfold when a people is restored, with sovereignty, to its ancestral homeland. If Beinart could read the Shabbat culture sections of either *Ha'aretz* on the left or *Makor Rishon* on the right, he would see the celebration of Hebrew poetry each week, the preoccupation with newly published Israeli books, interviews with philosophers and public intellectuals. Yes, there are articles about Bibi and corruption and annexation and the pandemic and poverty and the demise of America and much more – but nowhere would he find fretting about annihilation.

But Beinart cannot know that, of course, because he cannot read those newspapers. He cannot read Israeli literature until it is translated (and most of it is not), or mine Israeli Op Ed pages of all sorts for a sense of what animates us. He only "knows" what animates Israel by listening to the sales pitches of the very American Jewish institutions that he wishes to dismantle.

What Beinart does know is that the revitalization of Jewish life that is Israel's hallmark would end with his proposal. Jews would quickly become a minority here, just as they were in Europe. They would be surrounded by hostile masses, just as they were in Europe, and even if none of that every ended in annihilation, it would certainly (and rapidly) destroy the Jewish confidence that has been at the core of the Judaism's revitalization in Israel. In other words, Beinart cares more about the future of the Palestinians than he does about the future of Judaism's richness. That's his right, but he ought to admit that.

Other sleights of hand lie literally everywhere one turns. Just as he states as a matter of obvious fact (when he is mostly wrong) that Zionism is motivated by avoiding annihilation, he is equally dishonest when it comes to defining what Zionism *is*.

"The essence of Zionism is not a Jewish State in the land of Israel; it is a Jewish *home* in the land of Israel." Again, banking on his readers' ignorance, Beinart adopts Dmitri Shumsky's

read of Herzl's *The Jewish State*, without mentioning that Shumsky's view is far from mainstream, or that Nathan Birnbaum, an associate of Herzl, specifically called for the establishment of a sovereign Jewish state at the First Zionist Congress. By the time Ben-Gurion, Jabotinsky, Begin and others were all certain that they needed a state, it was because they understood that nothing else would keep the Jews in Palestine alive; no "home" without a "state" was going to be possible. We could have a "state" or we could have nothing. Beinart thinks we ought to gamble and see once again if maybe they were wrong; that we might end up with nothing does seem to concern him.

He does mention the Brit Shalom movement's binational aspirations in the 1930's, but notably ignores the fact that, due to Arab rejection of their efforts, Brit Shalom has long since been relegated to the dustbin of history. He mentions Gershom Scholem, one of the Jewish world's intellectual giants of the twentieth century, in passing, but of course does not note that Scholem, who had at one time been an avid supporter of something like Beinart's vision, later wrote to Hannah Arendt that "Certainly, as an old Brit Shalom follower, I myself have once belonged to the opposite camp. But I am not presumptuous enough to think that the politics of Brit Shalom wouldn't have found precisely the same Arab enemies, enemies who are mainly interested not in our morality or political convictions, but in whether or not we are here in Palestine at all."

Beinart's readers will not know that his "new" idea has already been tried, and it failed. Beinart himself *does* know that, but positioning himself as the prophet of hope and reconciliation demands that he not mention that.

I offer, for now, but one last example of the sort of sleight of hand that makes Beinart's piece so intellectually dishonest – and manipulative of his own readership. In Beinart's world, Palestinians do not have agency. The responsibility for today's mess lies with Israel, not with them. This infantilization of the Arabs has always struck me as utterly racist (and evokes that horrifying American use of "boy" for African American men), but that is another discussion. For the moment, let's just look at its dishonesty.

Beinart tell us that in 1994, many Palestinians hoped that the Palestinian Authority, which had just been created by the Oslo Accords, "would be the embryo of their state in the West Bank and Gaza." But, he continues, "as the prospect of Palestinian statehood has faded ..."

Why did it fade? Beinart writes as if someone hung a family portrait too close to a window for decades and then discovered, distraught and anguished, that it had faded away. He does not want his readers to know that Oslo failed because its signing unleashed a massive wave of Palestinian terror and Israeli death (which the Israeli right had predicted). He does not tell us that some Israelis who knew Yitzchak Rabin believe (and have written) that had Rabin not been assassinated, he was going to pull out of the Oslo Accords because it had unleashed such violence. He tells us that the PLO recognized Israel in 1988, but does not tell his readers that the Second Intifada, which claimed a horrific number of lives on both sides, followed Ehud Barak's offer of statehood Yasser Arafat, who instead of responding by

demanding different terms and negotiations, unleashed the Second Intifada and did more than anyone in history to kill Palestinian statehood.

So, to read Beinart's piece is to slog through an array of misrepresentations and omissions, to feel dismissed because we know he hopes we don't know enough to catch him.

Finally, one comment not about Beinart's argument, but his proposal. Ultimately, what Beinart's suggestion (that we give up on Jewish statehood) shows is how much more American are his instincts than Jewish.

Israel has had a long and complex history, stained time and again by many moral failings. Israelis have almost always responded by demanding that we be better, not by suggesting that we end the project. Israelis' frustration with the peace process, the government's handling of the pandemic, our medieval and misogynist, homophobic rabbinate, Israel's teetering economy, the inequality that Israeli Arabs face daily and much more has not given rise to anything akin to America's desire to destroy itself.

The unfettered quest for self-immolation, the intellectual thinness of cancel culture, the rage that pulls down statues of Christopher Columbus and advocates abandoning capitalism for socialism without any regard for how Marx's theory unfolded in the Soviet Union, in China, in Cuba or elsewhere – all that is a distinctly American response. Israelis, for all their many faults, show little sign of the cultural fatigue, intellectual sloppiness or willed oblivion-to-consequences that are now emblematic of America's youth. What Beinart has done is to essentially take America's desire for self-destruction and ask Israelis to adopt it.

No thanks.

We Israelis, like Americans, have had no perfect leaders. David Ben-Gurion was a racist who had utter disdain for Mizrahi Jews and their culture. Menachem Begin got innocent people killed in the King David bombing and decades later, launched the disastrous Lebanon War. Golda Meir famously asked, "What Palestinian people?" Ariel Sharon allowed the massacre at Sabra and Shatila.

Yet we also know that David Ben-Gurion built a Jewish state against all odds and kept it alive when that seemed impossible. Menachem Begin was instrumental in getting the British to leave Palestine, fought against military rule over Israeli Arabs, made peace with Egypt, returned the Sinai and destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor. Golda Meir launched Israel's long tradition of reaching out to African countries, out of a belief that if we had independence and hope, they should, too. It was Ariel Sharon who got Israel out of Gaza.

That is why we're not tearing down statues. We prefer to recognize that life is complicated, that great human beings are invariably also deeply flawed. The same is true of countries. Israel's conflict with the Palestinians is exhausting and depressing and surfaces much of Israel's ugliness. No one should "prove" their love for Israel by denying that.

But Israel was created not to be perfect, but to restore the Jewish people to its ancestral homeland, and thus to allow the Jewish people and its culture to thrive and flourish as it can nowhere else on earth. Looked at that way, Israel is not only miraculous, it is a huge success. We Israelis can see our terrible mistakes and still take pride in what we've accomplished; many of us are horrified by what it still not right here, but have no interest in Beinart's suggestion that we therefore commit suicide.

Peter Beinart believes that because we cannot get the Palestinians to recognize our right to a state, we should knock over our proverbial king and give up the project. We believe that while we wait for the Palestinians to want a future more than they want revenge, we should build this society and the Jewish cultural, intellectual, religious and historical revival it makes possible. My bet is that Israelis will continue to build the society that is the largest, culturally richest, most intellectually dynamic Jewish community anywhere in the world, and we'll still be at it long after Peter Beinart has been entirely forgotten.

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