

One people, multiple views

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Is the UN partition plan of November 1947 still relevant? Is the official recognition of the Jewish people's legitimate need for an independent state still applicable? Is there a real threat to the legitimacy of Jewish identity, and is the Jewish state really, as argued by various opponents, compatible with democracy and humanism?

Metzila, a new organization founded and led by Prof. Ruth Gavison, says loud and clear, yes: Israel, the Jewish state, is legitimate and compatible with humanistic and democratic principles, directing its arguments at - though she did not mention them specifically - both post-Zionists and the messianic branch of the religious right wing.

Metzila - an acronym for the Hebrew Center for Jewish, Liberal and Humanistic Zionist Thought - was founded in 2005, but the decision to hold its opening event this week was not coincidental; this week is very important on the Zionist and modern Jewish calendar. It marks 60 years since the UN vote on the partition of Mandatory Palestine into two independent states: one Jewish and one Arab.

The evening celebrating the anniversary took place at Mishkenot Sha'ananim on Sunday and included interesting remarks on the fateful decision by guests and members of Metzila, before Gavison closed the evening. Dr. Alex Jacobson, a member of the board of Metzila, revealed some of the behind-the-scenes positions of the Soviets in 1947 (they were the fiercest supporters of Jewish self-determination). The moderator, Maj.-Gen. (res.) Giora Rom, also a member of Metzila, recalled his memories as a prisoner of war in Egypt, when he insisted during his interrogation - despite the additional suffering it caused him - that Jerusalem was and would always be the capital of Israel. Although the Annapolis conference was not mentioned, the question of Jerusalem's fate being in the international limelight overshadowed the entire evening.

Metzila was created, according to its mission statement, to deal with the "ongoing tendency among Israelis and Jews from abroad to question the legitimacy of Jewish nationalism, and its capacity to meet the universal values of humanism and democracy."

Gavison's attitude, her harsh critique and opposition to the "post-Zionist" advocates is no secret. "The November 29 decision was and still is one of the highest achievements of the Zionist movement," she said at the end of the conference. "It proved two things: That creating a Jewish state was just, and that

the Jews needed support, but they could do it. The decision also proved the state had to be in the Land of Israel; Jews are not colonialists in this land, since this is the land in which they became a people, where they first experienced their national independence... And this was not merely the achievement of the Jews who became Israeli citizens, but of all the Jews in the world."

Gavison added: "Some have said that with the creation of the State of Israel the Zionist movement had finished its task, and now the state could become the state of all its citizens... It sounds to me as if we had succeeded too much, and in my eyes it is not true that Zionism fulfilled its role with the creation of the state. Those who wept upon hearing the decision of the UN and their spirits are still here with us, there is still place for the pride in being Jewish, Zionist, liberal and humanistic," concluded Gavison to thunderous applause. Her speech was immediately followed by a loud rendition of "Hatikva" by the whole audience.

While Gavison and many of the members of Metzila are known for their position against the post-Zionist trend, they believe the religious Right also poses a threat. "There are those who use their Judaism as a tool to take by force more than is needed," she said, somewhat cryptically.

"Isn't the threat from the post-Zionist proponents a little exaggerated," I asked Jacobson. "After all, they are a small group whose influence on the public at large is almost nonexistent."

"I do not see it that way," he explained. "They are indeed few, but their impact on academia, the media and the arts is much wider than their real numbers; their impact is evident even in things that non-post-Zionists say and write. It is the same with the right-wing religious tenets. How many people in the religious right wing support the project of destroying the mosques on the Temple Mount? Very few, but nevertheless, their impact is far larger."

Despite all the divisions, "one thing is certain," he added. "The ingathering of the exiles in the Israeli society is a colossal achievement... Today we are one people, with a pluralistic - and welcome in my view - attitude and characteristics."

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