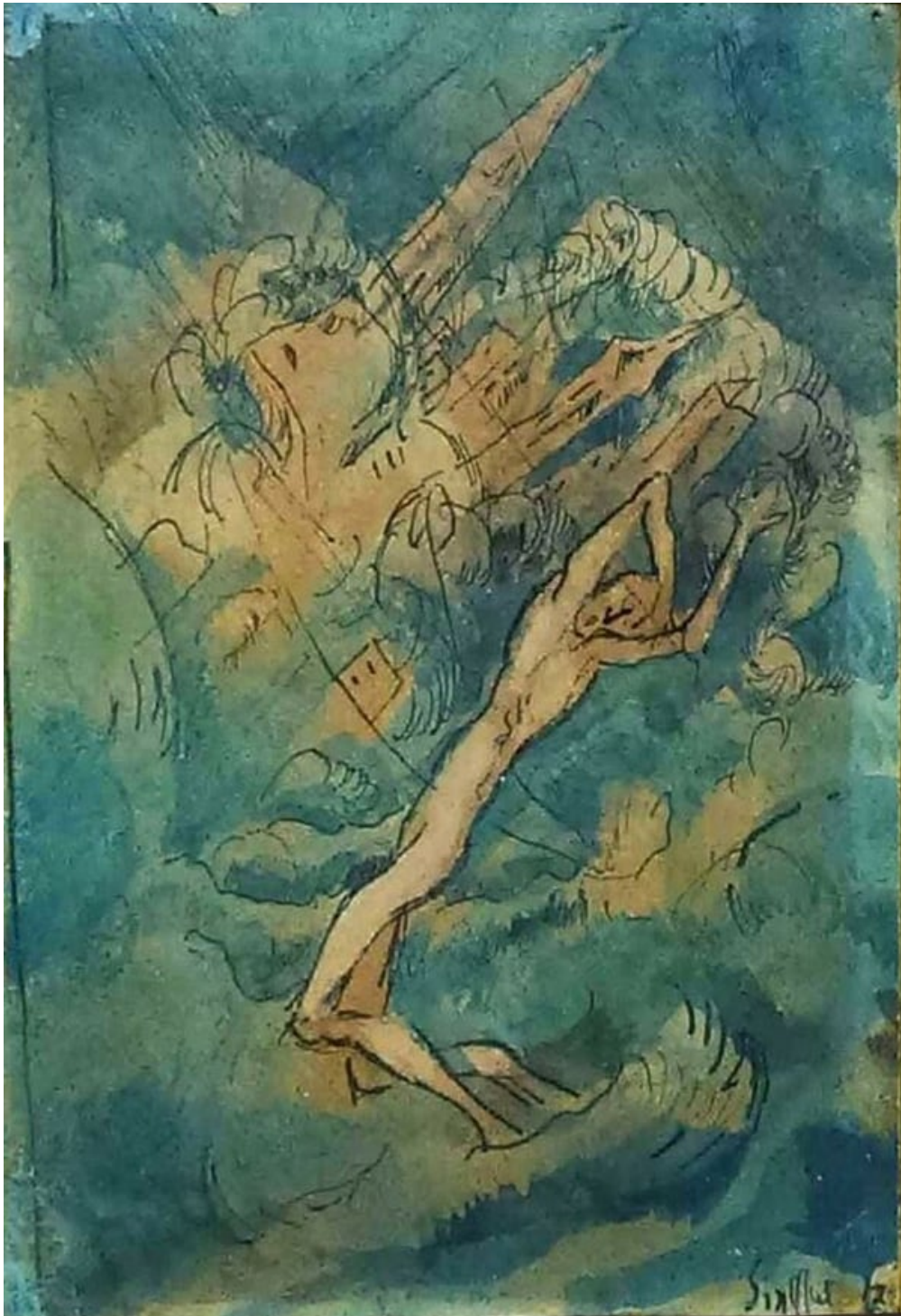


The Crack-Up of the Israeli Left: A Book Review

by [Ardie Geldman](#) (March 2020)



Untitled, Jacob Steinhardt, 1912

“Left” and “Right” are terms that have come to describe, at least in the West, the two main political-ideological camps that divide a society. The practice originates with the French Revolution of 1789. Members of the National Assembly who supported King Louis XVI sat to the president’s right; those who opposed him sat to his left. From that time “Right” has come to be associated with political conservatives who place national interests above international concerns and who favor minimal government intervention into citizens’ lives. In contrast the political Left advocates for greater government social planning and involvement, stricter economic regulation, and affiliation with Leftist movements in other countries. Communism, Socialism, and Liberalism, in order of descending ideological rigidity, constitute the political Left.

The leaders of the modern Zionist movement in the early 20th century emigrated from societies where Communism and Socialism originated and were strongly influenced by these doctrines. They brought these ideas with them to pre-state Israel, the “Yishuv,” where they established an assortment of collectivist institutions. Among these were the communal society of the kibbutz; the socialist-oriented national workers’ union, the Histadrut; a national medical insurance program, Kupat Holim; the “workers’ bank,” Bank HaPoalim, and a nationalized construction company, Solel Boneh.

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For its first thirty years, following independence in 1948, much of Israeli society reflected the classic socialist ethos. The country was governed under the stewardship of the Mapai party; to its left was the opposition Marxist Mapam party. Principally this meant a socialist-democracy with a national economy closely managed by the government. And every Mapai led government reflected the will of the Histadrut, the country's all-powerful national labor union.

But what it means to be on the political Left in Israel changed radically following the country's victory in the June, 1967, Six-Day War. The Israeli Left, by now incorporating a generation that was less idealistic than that which founded the state, was strongly influenced by the international zeitgeist and Third World politics of the 1960s. In response, Israel's Left reordered its political priorities. Adherence to authoritarian socialist economic policies was of lesser importance. Being on the Israeli Left

now meant dedicating oneself to the goal of seeing to the evacuation of the Israel Defense Forces and Israel's civilian population from all of Judea and Samaria, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem to be replaced by a Palestinian state. Some Israeli Leftists over the years drifted so far from traditional socialist values that today they are among Israel's growing population of capitalist millionaires who still vote for the Labor Party.



MORDECHAI NISAN

This ideological transformation was accompanied by social changes reflective of the times. Their impact on the State of Israel are the focus of Mordechai Nisan's *The Crack-Up of the Israeli Left*. *Crack-Up* might be dismissed as one man's diatribe if the book wasn't so detailed, if the topic wasn't so serious, and if the author wasn't an accomplished scholar. Nisan was born in Montreal. He earned a doctorate in Political Science from McGill University and after moving to Israel taught Middle East Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem from 1976-2010. He has been affiliated with a number of academic and public institutions in Israel as teacher and consultant. Unsurprisingly, given Hebrew University's reputation for being a bastion of leftwing political ideology in the Social Sciences, History, and Philosophy, Nisan's strong politically rightwing views resulted, he relates, in his encountering some "mean-spirited bias" and "unpleasant personal incidents with a few Hebrew University professors who were ostensible colleagues." He names three.

The "crack up" of the title is not a reference to the obliteration of the Israeli Left, although Nisan does discuss the diminution of its direct political power; its representation in the Knesset continues to shrink. Rather, he contends that this sector of Israeli society has "lost its mind." How so?

According to Nisan, who has been collecting newspaper articles and gleaning media coverage about this topic for some forty years, Israel's political Left, as a consequence of its virtual obsession with peacemaking and seeing an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has lost touch with the essence of Zionism and Judaism. It has come to embody "a school of

thought which is detached from the national historical moorings of Jewish peoplehood and devoid of political reality . . . ” Politically, some on the Left all but abandoned the idea of a Jewish nation-state and appreciation for its attendant virtues. Culturally, many have become both alienated from and are ignorant of the Hebrew Bible and the practice of Judaism. It is from these sources that the very notion of a people called Israel, the territory of their homeland, and the strong family and social values that have historically shaped Jewish society arises.

During the country's first decades Israel's mainstream political Left, in spite of its strong secularism and even its membership in the Socialist International, was unabashedly Zionist and nationalist. It harbored no doubts about the legitimacy of the Jewish People having returned to their homeland, it took pride in promoting the modern Hebrew language, and it contributed to a growing (mostly) Jewish and democratic society. The Israel of that era, although far from puritanical, generally clung to more traditional values—a definition of family based on a female mother, a male father and one or more children, public modesty in both dress and speech, and a comparative absence of alcohol and drug abuse. That description of Israel has come loose.

Nisan promotes his thesis, and conveys his angst, by bringing as evidence a summary, as it were, of the reams of articles and other related sources on this topic he has preserved over the years. The result is a no-holds barred indictment of the Israeli Left. Much of the book reads like a rogues' gallery, even a “blacklist.” Nisan refers to it as a survey. Whatever term one may use to describe it, this small volume offers a comprehensive panoply of Israel's and Zionism's fiercest critics and detractors. It is a virtual catalogue of ‘the

names and statements regarding leftist deviance, castigation and abandonment of Zionism, Jewish nationalism, and Israeli interests." Among this registry of disparagers are named Israelis and non-Israelis, Jews and non-Jews. Throughout the book Nisan's language is direct and his antagonism transparent. He states in his preface that "The Left could be labeled hallucinatory, delirious, treasonous, puerile, and psychotic." In a later chapter, "Foreign Jewish Leftists and Others," he refers to those he identifies as "villains." He sees Israel's Arab citizenry as being culturally and politically incompatible with its Jewish majority and a potential threat to the country's security. The best he says about the country's haredim, or ultra-Orthodox, population is that they lean to the political Right and have helped "sustain majority-based and rather stable coalition governments." Otherwise, Nisan brands them as a self-serving community whose members "wallow in corruption and criminality – from tax evasion, sexual misdemeanors, to marital Sephardi-Ashkenazi discrimination."

But for all its invective the book was not written with a poison pen. Behind the vituperation Nisan recounts real actions and quotes by a long list of Israelis from the realms of politics, media, education, the judiciary, the arts and even the military whose denunciations of Israeli policies, Israeli institutions, and even Israel itself, reflect an abandonment of traditional Jewish and Zionist values. A glaring example is former Speaker of Israel's Knesset and former Head of the Jewish Agency Avrum Burg who argues that Israel should not be a Jewish state. The critical actions and words of other Leftists cited by Nisan were not intended to jeopardize or delegitimize Israel, just the opposite if one was to ask each source. But, he argues, the fact that the Israeli Left promotes a secular universalistic worldview with "peace at any price" being its objective has naturally led to

that camp advocating policies, or having a hand in past decisions, that were likely, or, in retrospect actually proved to be, injurious to Israel. Here the best example is the destruction of the Jewish communities of Gush Katif and the expulsion of their residents.

The greatest danger from the Left to Israel's future lies not with the latter's politicians but rather, and here Nisan refers to Zvi Shiloah's book "Leftism in Israel," the Left's hegemony over people's thoughts, words, and culture. "They (Leftists) shape your mind, they dictate your feelings," warns Nisan. The real threat is the Left's influence over culture and education in Israel. Nowhere is this truer today than on the country's university campuses and in the popular media. Universalism, inclusiveness, a near obsession with social justice, the irrelevancy of borders, the irrelevancy of matrimony, fluid gender identity are ideas and values that find wide support among Israel's Left. This is all to the detriment, avers Nisan, of Israel's mantle as the nation-state of the Jewish People. The confluence of these values diminishes the population's feelings of patriotism and the sense of common purpose and fate that contributed to the founding and the building of the state. Thus, Israel's security becomes undermined from within.

Political ideology exists along a continuum. Nisan's characterization of Israel's Left does not reflect this. He appears to have thrown all Leftists into one basket. For example, there is no distinction made between notable former Israeli president Chaim Herzog and the provocative far-Leftist Israeli attorney Felicia Langer, both of whom he associates in the same paragraph with Israel's Communist Party. Or in discussing Leftist politics at The Hebrew University he mentions the far more extreme Leftist, Professor Zeev

Sternhell, in the same section as the late rabbi, educator, and political liberal, David Hartman. He juxtaposes paragraphs citing former New Republic editor and openly identifying Zionist, Martin Peretz with anti-Zionist Princeton professor and former UN Special Rapporteur, Richard Falk. There are many similar examples in the book. Readers would be better edified had Nisan differentiated personages by group, perhaps by dedicating separate sub-chapters to “hard Leftists,” “mainstream Leftists,” and “Liberals,” respectively. These ideological camps are decidedly not the same, each playing a different role within Israeli society, and it is wrong to conflate them.

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There seems to be somewhat of a “stream of consciousness” dictating the choice and order of subjects that constitute the book’s first two chapters. One strains to understand how the potpourri of content, informative as it is, pertains to their respective titles, “The Noble Lie and Israel” and “History and Culture of Israeli Politics.” Chapters three and four are a digression into the Israeli Right and non-Jewish Rightists in Israel and abroad. Much of these two short chapters consists of nothing more than extensive lists of both individuals and organizations that merit a place on the author’s “honor roll.” Neither these two chapters, nor the chapter near the end of the book that proffers a controversial view of the Rabin assassination, meld well with the others. Perhaps Nisan will use the material he has amassed through the years to produce a book dedicated to the Right in Israel.

Throughout much of the book, even in the chapter entitled "The History and Culture of Israeli Politics," there is a considerable amount of back and forth time travel. For example, the section about the 2005 Gush Katif expulsion is found on page 105. But a separate section dedicated to the 1993 Oslo Accords begins on page 116. The chronological distortion is confusing and distracts from the logical flow of ideas.

A volume of this nature, essentially an extensive audit of statements and actions by Israel's political Left over the years demonstrating this camp's estrangement from the Zionist ethos and Judaism, would have been greatly served by an index. Given the weighty listing of people and institutions throughout the volume, the absence of an index is a disservice to the average reader and impedes its functionality as a resource for researchers.

Finally, in light of Mordechai Nisan's long association with Israel's far Right and the pugnacious tone of this volume it should not come as a surprise if it does not find a place among the course syllabi in Israel's universities, one exception being Ariel University in Samaria. This would be a mistake.

Nisan focuses upon a controversial aspect of Israeli society and, at least with respect to the far Left, provides credible evidence in the course of making his case. If the reader can disregard the author's unconcealed emotion, the book is useful to anyone attempting to understand some of the complexity of Israeli politics.

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Ardie Goldman is a writer and public speaker who lives in Efrat, Israel. His articles on Jewish life and Israel and book reviews have appeared in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, the *Journal of Jewish Communal Studies*, the *Jerusalem Post* and *The Times of Israel*. He is currently working on "Counter Tourism," a program to respond to pro-Palestinian protest tourism. His website is www.iTalkIsrael.com.