

# A Question of Good Will

## The Question of Palestine

By Edward Said

Times Books.

265 pp. \$12.50.

### Reviewed by

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EDWARD SAID presents in this book, for the first time in any European language, a sympathetic, nonvindictive argument for the Palestinian cause. He answers Israeli views in terms a Westerner can understand; more than this, he makes a strong, subtle exposition for the PLO.

He has three main points: Zionism is a specific case of the European worldview he calls Orientalism; it requires a systematic denial of Palestinian rights; and the only solution for its evil consequences lies in sincere attempts at mutual toleration and existence. Each of these needs further explanation.

In a previous work, *Orientalism*, Said argued that there was a general modern European approach to non-Westerners, one which denied them full humanity and so paved the way for their conquest and subjugation. Seen in this light, Zionism is not the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel but merely another manifestation of European indifference to a non-Western people: "In formulating the concept of a Jewish nation 'reclaiming' its own territory, Zionism not only accepted the generic racial concepts of European culture, it also banked on the fact that Palestine was actually peopled not by an advanced but by a backward people, over which it *ought* to be dominant." The Zionist adage, "a people

without a land for a land without a people," is cited as proof of the feeling that the over half a million non-Jews who were living on that land did not matter.

According to Said, the translation of the Zionist ideal into hard facts turned this attitude into a policy of negating Palestinian Arab identity and nationality. The Zionist reality exiled Palestinians from their own land and suppressed their political, geographic and human qualities. Said claims that identifying the very name "Palestinian" with "terrorist," keeping the Occupied Territories "politically illiterate," and a "bloodcurdling . . . list of human indignities" have all served this purpose. Consequently, "everything positive from the Zionist standpoint looked absolutely negative from the perspective of the native Arab Palestinians."

But Said accepts that Israel is here to stay; thus, looking ahead, he urges its accommodation to an equally permanent Palestinian state. The two entities, Israel and Palestine, must come to terms, recognize each other, learn to tolerate one another. Zionists must stop denying the Palestinian existence; when they do, Said says, they will be pleasantly surprised to find that since shortly after the 1973 war the Palestinian people have reconciled themselves to Israel's remaining in their midst. "Unlike the Israelis, I think, most Palestinians fully realize that their Other, the Israeli-Jewish people, is a concrete political reality with which they must live in the future." They signaled this first with the idea of a "secular democratic state" in Palestine, then by agreeing to a Palestinian state *alongside*, not *instead of* Israel (although this position has never been stated explicitly).

No brief schema can do justice to the rich chaos of Said's thought. His writing bursts with ideas he can barely control; as a result, few paragraphs end recognizably near the topic they started with. While this gives *The Question of Palestine* its interest, it also leads occasionally to near incoherence.

Without attempting to debate Said's views point by point, some of his serious flaws need to be mentioned. He reduces the historic claim of Jews to Palestine to "a sixty-year Jewish sovereignty over Palestine which had lapsed for two millennia." This assertion runs contrary to overwhelming evidence of Jewish rule in Palestine for centuries; more important, it quietly finesses the basis of Zionist feeling, the central role of the Land of Israel in Jewish life through many centuries of diaspora (a role that the Palestinian longing for the same land is today coming to resemble).

And even as he derides the brief years of a Jewish state so long ago, Said neglects to note that Palestinian Arabs *never* had a state of their own. He implies that Palestinian nationalist feeling has always existed, but in truth it developed in this century, slowly, in response to Zionism, and it has been powerfully felt only since 1967.

On the key issue of Jewish immigration to Palestine, Said believes that "all the constitutive energies of Zionism were premised on the excluded presence, that is, the functional absence of 'native people' in Palestine." To prove this, he quotes the unflattering views of Arabs held by numerous Zionist leaders. Regrettably, here he is again employing a sleight of hand. The Europeans had little interest in or respect for the Arabs of Palestine, but nothing Said quotes points to a policy of repression or exclusion. The Zionists repeatedly stressed their concern for Jews and ignored the Arabs as much as possible: They did not have the wicked ideas the author ascribes to them.

The subject of Palestinian terrorism clearly discomforts Said. Several times he notes that "in brute numbers of bodies and property destroyed" its effect has been smaller than what the Zionists have perpetrated (even if this were true, it ignores the crucial fact that terrorism relies on small numbers to strike fear in an entire population.) He does say that "many acts of individual adventure (hijacking, kidnapping, and the like) *were* acts of unbal-

anced, finally immoral, and useless destruction" which "horrified" him. Generally, though, he ignores acts of terrorism and other aggression against the Jews, and he finishes this discussion with the amazing argument that "Israel literally produced, manufactured . . . the [Palestinian] terrorist."

A variety of issues come up in partial, implicit, ultimately unsatisfactory fashion. Said says, for example, that "Arabs were never admitted as members" to the "completely apartheid" kibbutzim, but instead occupied their own "Arab Gulag Archipelago." The implication seems to be that some Arabs wished to join the kibbutzim and were kept out by racial laws; worse, that being excluded from the kibbutzim meant a concentration camp existence. Not only is this flatly wrong, but it contradicts the author's key point that "no Palestinian, regardless of his political stripe, has ever been able to reconcile himself to Zionism." Either Jews kept Arabs out or no Arabs wanted to join at the heart of the Zionist movement. Said cannot have it both ways.

Occasionally Said slips into a frankly polemical and unrestrained use of language. The Jewish-American reaction to a U.S. policy he calls "intellectual terrorism"; Begin's views he terms "fossilized theological madness"; only "an anachronistic biblical argument" supports Israeli settlements in the West Bank; and the Gush Emunim are "a collection of fanatics whose zeal and violence makes the 'Islamic' hordes seem positively gentle." (Such statements sound particularly strange in the light of the recent actions by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran, and at U.S. diplomatic missions throughout the Moslem world.) Yasir Arafat, in contrast, is "a much misunderstood and maligned political personality," and Fatah's politics are described as "more or less improvisatory, in some cases even family-style."

The author intends *The Question of Palestine* to give the reader a sense that, despite a long record of outrages directed against them, the Palestinians have accepted Israel and are prepared

to come to terms with it. This raises a final question: To what extent does Said, a member of the Palestine National Council, represent PLO thinking? His sweetly reasonable contention that "if more people take up the question of Palestine as a matter for the common good of Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews," then the two peoples will soon enough exist together "side by side, in peace and harmony," may either represent a PLO consensus or merely the wishful thoughts of a romantic professor of comparative literature at Columbia University. While one hopes that Edward Said's realism and good will are widespread in the PLO, the organization to date has provided very little evidence that this is the case.

## Tale of a Soviet Prisoner

### Next Year in Jerusalem

By Avital Shcharansky  
with Ilana Ben-Josef  
William Morrow.  
189 pp. \$9.95.

### Reviewed by Donna Arzt

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THE PHRASE "Next Year in Jerusalem" has long resounded from Passover *seder* tables, expressing the theme of Jewish redemption and exodus from slavery to freedom. In recent years it has become the adopted motto of Soviet Jews, who often transform it into the more sanguine "This Year in Jerusalem." Now it is also widely identified as the inspired final words of Anatoly Shcharansky before being sentenced to 13 years of prison and a hard labor camp by a Soviet court in July 1978:

"For more than 2,000 years the Jewish people, my people, have been dispersed. But wherever they are, wherev-

er Jews are found, each year they have repeated, 'Next Year in Jerusalem.' Now, when I am further than ever from my people, from Avital, facing many arduous years of imprisonment, I say, turning to my people, my Avital, Next Year in Jerusalem! And I turn to you, the Court, who were required to confirm a pre-determined sentence: to you I have nothing to say."

Dismissing his KGB-appointed lawyer and defending himself after 16 months incommunicado, Shcharansky did not know that President Carter had twice proclaimed him innocent of espionage charges. He was unaware of the massive, world-wide outcry at his arrest, or even of the crowds of Jewish, dissident and Western supporters who had congregated outside the Moscow courtroom. But he must have known, intuitively, that his wife had not given up her determined struggle for his freedom.

*Next Year in Jerusalem* is Avital Shcharansky's memoir of her own and her husband's joint struggle, and of the obstacles placed in the path of other Soviet Jewish "refuseniks" who have been denied repatriation in Israel. It belongs in the tradition of memoirs by the wives of Russian dissident poets murdered by Stalin, Peretz Markish and Osip Mandelstam. But this book is different in at least one regard: It is a call to action, because *her* husband can still be saved.

Before his arrest in March 1977, Shcharansky, 31, had been one of the leading activists in the Jewish emigration movement, although he was less known in the West than some of his associates. After graduating with highest honors from a technological physics institute, he deliberately took a computer programming job at an open institution so as not to impede his emigration plans. Nevertheless, when he first applied to emigrate to Israel in 1973, he was refused permission on the usual grounds of "access to classified material." Later he was dismissed from this job and avoided prosecution for parasitism only by private, unregistered tutoring in English, mathematics and physics.