

Review

Jasmin Habib, *Israel, Diaspora, and the Routes of National Belonging*, University of Toronto Press, 2004, 317 pp

THE TITLES OF RECENT BOOKS on the politics of Israel among North American Jews—*Irreconcilable Differences?* by Steven Rosenthal, *Divided We Stand* by Ofira Seliktar, *Jew versus Jew* by Samuel Freedman—suggest a common storyline: Over the past two decades, in response to conflicts over the peace process, the Pollard spy case, conversion, marriage, and the legal status of non-Orthodox movements, Israel has shifted from a source of consensus among North American Jews to an increasingly sharp point of contention. Nevertheless, American Jews continue to express strong political support for Israel, and many continue to invest a great deal of emotional energy in their connection to the Jewish state. This state of affairs might reasonably prompt one to ask: Why, in spite of the conflicts and disagreements, do so many North American Jews continue to express strong attachment to Israel?

Anthropologist Jasmin Habib's *Israel, Diaspora, and the Routes of National Belonging* seeks to answer this question. The research for the book, spanning several years in the late 1990s, entailed participant observation on three Israel Experience tours, participation in roughly 200 Israel-related events (lectures, films, celebrations, etc.) in two Canadian cities, and interviews with the Israel Experience trip participants and other members of the Canadian Jewish community. Habib's analytical goal was to learn how tour guides, lecturers, and community leaders represented Israel to North American Jews, both in Israel and in their diaspora communities, and how North American Jews responded to these representations. The book reads very much like a doctoral dissertation—it is overly long and detailed for any but the most motivated readers. It also suffers from rather serious methodological and interpretive errors. Still, the importance of the topic and the paucity of alternative treatments justify a careful assessment.

In the opening chapter, Habib establishes the theoretical framework for her inquiry. She finds the anthropological literature on diasporas to be less helpful than the literature on nationalism in describing the active construction of a sense of belonging among “deterritorialized” subjects. In framing her approach, she therefore draws on Benedict Anderson’s notion of the nation as an “imagined community,” and on the works of Roland Barthes, Ana Maria Alonso, and Michel de Certeau. Among national subjects and members of diaspora communities alike, nationalism works discursively by inviting people to view themselves as part of an idealized, mythologized whole, and by making mythological narratives of the past seem transparent and natural. “In passing from history to nature,” writes Roland Barthes, “myth . . . abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions.” (p. 20) According to Alonso, nationalist narratives engage in a process of “idealization” through which “the past is cleaned up, rendered palatable and made the embodiment of nationalist values. . . . Past which cannot be incorporated are excluded by national history.” (p. 21) Ordinary people draw upon such narratives and thus situate themselves as part of the nation or its diaspora. Following de Certeau, however, Habib stresses that diaspora subjects potentially subvert the institutionalized narratives by setting them alongside other culturally available perspectives.

The first substantial section of the book describes the guides’ narratives on the Israel Experience tours. Although the author participated in a variety of tours, including one sponsored by a civil rights organization, she views the differences as apparently trivial, in large measure because the tour guides were all Israeli trained and certified professionals. She therefore describes core narratives common to all three tours. The first collection of narratives, which she dubs *One nation, One land*, emphasizes the Jews’ unique relationship to the land of Israel, either as its divinely chosen or longest surviving inhabitants. In Jerusalem, on top of Masada, and elsewhere, the tour guides emphasized evidence of continuous Jewish settlement in the region, and encouraged tour participants to contemplate the miraculous return of the Jewish people. They also forged direct links between Jewish textual culture and the physicality of the place by, for example, reading Biblical passages describing olives and spices while inviting tour participants to taste the local produce. Meanwhile, the claims to the land of other peoples of the region, including the indigenous Palestinian population,

were either denigrated or ignored. In sum, “[w]hatever the organization’s political or social orientation, all of the sites chosen by organizers as well as the narratives presented at those sites seemed to have been arranged in such a way as to place Jews, their histories, and the survival of their traditions in the territory and body politic of contemporary Israel.” (p. 40)

The second set of narratives, conveyed mostly in relation to the Negev Desert, emphasize the redemption of the land and the modernization of its Arab and Jewish inhabitants. Judging from Habib’s descriptions, if the guides didn’t actually utter the phrase, “A people without a land for a land without a people,” they certainly conveyed its substance. The core narratives described the Negev as virtually abandoned when the Zionists arrived, its previous agricultural settlements destroyed by the overgrazing by nomadic Bedouin tribes. The Jews, however, proved to be superior stewards of the land, and through the use of science and hard work, they made the desert bloom. “By settling the land, the Jews redeemed it, and now it has become a garden again.” (p. 66) According to Habib, the guides consistently ignored the actual history of the Bedouin in the region. Moreover, the guides’ narratives of modernization depicted the Arab inhabitants of the region, together with the *Mizrabi* Jewish newcomers, as primitives. In sum, the narratives labeled *Development and Democracy* “locate the Jews’ return to Israel as part of a modernizing and democratizing trajectory. Tropes of return and redemption infuse the descriptions of modernization, especially in and around the Negev Desert, which suggests that not only the Negev but also non-European Jews were developed or civilized by Israel.” (p. 40)

The third set of narratives, *Settling the Nation, Defending the State*, organizes the history of Israel’s military conflicts with her neighbors. The emphasis in these narratives is consistently on Israel’s defensive posture and on her heroic triumph over well-equipped adversaries. “Bravery, boldness, and courage characterized all of Israel’s military endeavors, and its victories told the tale of a nation that was surviving against all odds.” (p. 91) Settling the land has been the primary mechanism through which the Jews have secured their borders. Invisible in these discourses are the motivations of surrounding Arab nations and also the price inflicted by Israeli settlement practices on the indigenous Palestinian population.

In the second half of the book, Habib compares the Zionist discourses with the views of speakers at community events in Toronto and the perspectives of former trip participants. In both cases, she finds many echoes of the core Zionist narratives including expressions of commitment to Israel as a refuge for the Jewish people and pride in Israel’s democracy and

development. However, she also records a great deal of critical commentary, second guessing, and ambivalence. Several interviewees raised “questions about citizenship, equality, democracy and (surprisingly) security, as issues that Israel must confront not just in Zionist or *Realpolitik* terms but also in terms of human needs and rights.” (p. 256) Interviewees, for example, criticized the official status of Orthodox Judaism:

I think a true democracy . . . and the statehood of Israel being a religious state are incongruent. It will always be a battle because a true democracy doesn't value one point of view, be it a religion or a type of state. . . . I don't think this will ever be a real democracy as long as laws of the land are embedded in a religious foundation. (p. 232)

Interview subjects also affirmed their diaspora identities and expressed sympathy for the plight of Palestinians:

I [had] commented on the whole concept that you mentioned about Israel as 'home.' I don't consider Israel as home, I consider Canada as home. I was born here. My parents and grandparents came here early in this century to this country. . . . I can identify with the early *halutzim*, the pioneers. . . . On the other hand, I regret that in order for the state to be established another people were dispossessed, the Palestinian people. (p. 235)

Moreover, not a single interview subject expressed an intention to move to Israel. Indeed, in Habib's account, the “biggest concern expressed by diaspora Jews was that they might not be able to continue identifying with a nation-state that no longer represented their ideas, especially with respect to democracy.” (p. 258)

The book's overarching argument, then, is that Zionist narration draws North American Jews into a dramatic tale of national persecution and redemption, and simultaneously erases alternative historical narratives, especially those of the Palestinians. Exposed to such narratives from birth, especially in the context of Zionist political and cultural activities, North American Jews view themselves as part of the national story of Israel. At the same time, they tend to second guess the narratives and contemplate alternatives. Habib concludes that the Canadian Jews she interviewed were less Zionist than “diasporicist” or “post-Zionist”—they tend to embrace the concept of Jewish peoplehood and feel a connection to Israelis as fellow Jews. But they don't tend to feel much connection to the land of Israel, per se, or any obligation to live in the modern Jewish state.

The book arguably makes a contribution to our theoretical grasp of diaspora nationalism. But flaws in interpretation and method cast doubt on its specific findings, especially with respect to the image of Israelis propagandizing right wing, chauvinistic versions of Zionism and diaspora Jews responding with more critical and universalistic ideas. To begin with the tour narratives, it seems unbelievable to this reviewer that they were as monolithic as the author suggests. Both the research literature on Israel tourism and my own experience observing recent birthright Israel trips certainly confirm the presence of the core narratives in typical Israel experience tours. However, on the tours I observed—and there is no reason to believe they were exceptional in this regard—alternative narratives were often suggested, and there was generally opportunity for discussion and disagreement. For example, over the summer, I observed several birthright tours of Masada organized around a core narrative about the dangers of Jewish extremism—a far cry from the conventional narrative of Jewish heroism in the face of an implacable enemy. In Habib’s own accounts, moreover, there is evidence that the trips were not quite so ideologically monolithic. She tells, for example, about several trips to Arab villages (in the Negev and Galil) and of frank discussions between tour participants and Arab speakers about the situation of Arabs in Israeli society.

Turning to the diaspora Jews themselves, Habib’s method brings her central findings into doubt. If Israeli tour guides are unlikely quite so narrow and predictable, North American Jews are unlikely quite so universalistic. To the extent that Habib’s subjects expressed universalistic alongside nationalistic views, this was likely a consequence of the interpersonal dynamics of the interview—what we might call a “gallery effect.” Habib describes herself as the daughter of a Palestinian Arab father and a Jewish Israeli mother—and her respondents apparently knew this, as well as the fact that she describes herself as a peace activist. Nevertheless, she records their often universalistic and pro-democracy discourses—and their weak ties (in a few cases) to the Jewishness of the Jewish state—as if these were her respondents’ only opinions. No doubt her respondents meant what they told her, but they also likely have other beliefs as well—beliefs that they were disinclined to share with this particular interviewer. A Zionist activist might have brought out the alternative perspectives and effectively suppressed the universalistic ones. Most of us are capable of striking a variety of political postures and feel enough ambivalence that we can do so without feeling hypocritical; different encounters bring out different sides. An alternative research strategy would have been to interview in focus groups.

Finally, the book also has a confusing political valence. The author deconstructs the Zionist narratives but never Palestinian or Arab ones. For example, she puts quotes around the phrase “Jewish return” but not around the alternative formulation *Jewish arrival*. And she repeatedly challenges the guides’ statements, for example, that Jews made the deserts bloom (Bedouin were there first); that Jewish settlements in the Negev were “attacked” in 1948 (the Jews might themselves be regarded as invaders); that Israel is a democratic and tolerant society (it treats Arabs as second-class citizens); and so forth. That the Zionist narratives are historical constructions is certainly true—but that doesn’t mean that they’re necessarily wrong or that the alternatives are any better. Indeed, in the theoretical introduction the author appears to embrace a constructionist approach that avoids treating narratives as “either true or false.” (p. 20) In practice, however, she treats virtually every word uttered by an Israeli guide with skepticism while treating Palestinian narratives as “correctives” rather than alternative constructions. The effect is to make her critical deconstruction of the Zionist narratives appear tendentious.