

Scholar's Corner

Between Jew and Arab, The Lost Voice of Simon Rawidowicz

by David Myers. Brandeis Press, 2009. 308 pp.

David Myers' book is a reminder that when timely concerns are supported by scholarship, we rabbis have a particular obligation to pay close attention. *Between Jew and Arab* brings to our attention the thinking of Simon Rawidowicz regarding Israel and Diaspora, Jewish responsibility, and the eternal status of the Jewish people. Rawidowicz was, during the final years of his life, professor at Brandeis University, after a career of distinguished writing and academic assignments that were destabilized by the Shoah and post-war years. The most singular contribution of this book is the presentation of one of Rawidowicz's long buried essays that speaks of the relationship of Jew to Arab.

Rawidowicz is not widely known among us, although occasionally liberal Jewish intellectuals use his ironic notion of the "ever-dying Jewish people" to ward off the perpetual anxiety that we are always on a slippery slope. Rawidowicz was both scholar and ideologue who did not despair of the Diaspora, and—although a Hebrew nationalist—(most of his writing was in Hebrew)—believed that the Diaspora was a valid locus for the future of Jewish life. His belief in the Jewish future was combined with his argument for the importance of the Diaspora as a partner with the Zionist "center." Myers has been thinking and writing about Rawidowicz in the past few years, but the occasion for this book was the discovery of one of Rawidowicz's important essays—readably translated by Myers and his UCLA colleague (and my teacher) Arnold Band as "Between Jew and Arab." The Hebrew essay title played on the shared three root letters in the names "Arab" and "Hebrew," while the decision to introduce the more diasporic term "Jew" into the translation forces a consciousness of Jewish universality on the reader. Rawidowicz was one of those thinkers who believed that an essential energy and momentum resided within Jews, and that Jewish life had a transcendent quality that insured our future viability. His was a delicate rebuke to much of what emerged as Zionist negations of the Diaspora. Rawidowicz both rejected Eretz Israel supremacy, and warned of the inevitable excesses in the very Jewish nationalism which he embraced in his unique way. (Think Dubnow and perhaps Kaplan rather than Ahad Ha'Am and certainly the Revisionists.)

Rawidowicz's essay would have been a moral warning at a time when no one would have heard it, and—indeed—it was never heard, and remained deposited amidst Rawidowicz's papers in his son's

Massachusetts home. Myers has reclaimed the essay and provided a fine piece of scholarship that situates the essay in the context of UN resolutions, writings about early Zionism, and a great deal of scholarship about the Zionist project. As I noted, Myers has been writing about Rawidowicz for some time, and situating his thinking in important theoretical ways. But this is new stuff.

The question of the Arab in Israel remains one of the central concerns that have plagued every military and political encounter in the last three decades. (See Ethan Bronner, in the NY TIMES of March 22.)

It is clear that many of Rawidowicz's arguments in the essay are compatible with Myers own scholarship and his prominent progressive activism. But *Between Arab and Jew* is not just a prop for Myers' concerns. Although generous in his appreciation of the Brandeis humanist's thinking, he is quick to point out where the scholar ideologue held exaggerated hopes and displayed a kind of naivete as to how the Zionist program was likely to unfold. No specific program emerges from Rawidowicz's essay which ends with the plea "may the remnant of Israel not commit acts of injustice." (p. 180) Myers cannot possibly suggest a next step in our behavior based on Rawidowicz's warning. But...

I am writing this short review partly out of a frustration I have felt in my work with ARZA, where I never found a way to propose critical and open minded discussion within our community. Our primary goal has been to get people to care seriously at all, to take that first or second trip to Israel, and to rejoice in our victory over soil and enemies, so that the complexity of moral action often takes a back seat. Among the reasons I appreciate this book is the grace with which it opens up the ever fading possibility of intelligent dialogue among American lovers of Zion. Too many of us, and certainly too many of our organizations, have wound up as apologists—granted that sometimes circumstances call for apologetics—and in a posture that pop psychology refers to as "denial." Too often dissent from the party line is interpreted as hostility or as giving succor to our opponents. Myers makes the case that Rawidowicz's cautions not only need to be heard, but that they need to be incorporated into any serious discussion or plans for our collective future. Myers argues that American Jews actually weaken our case for Israel by ignoring the realities and by failing to pay attention to another people clamoring for attention. Who among us does not succumb to the hypnotic effect of our visits and the deep affection towards our Israeli friends! I, like Shaul Magid in his review in *The Forward* (March 20), am frightened by tough talking American intellectuals,

and—more significantly—by dangerous partners in the inevitable political coalitions of contemporary Israel. We should all be frightened by militant notions of God-given rights to deprive others of their rights, even though there are bound to be winners and losers in such situations. Rawidowicz's words are a call to take seriously our oft-intoned prayer that "you know the heart of the stranger, because..." If his sense of the consequence of that knowledge may appear simplistic today, Rawidowicz's voice calls us to struggle against that other naivete that reads Zionist history only in our terms.

In my first visit to Israel, after 1967, I stayed on the East side of Jerusalem, and have continued to stay there on many occasions—both in modest hostels and diplomatic hostels, where I hear another narrative. During that first visit, I was assured that the Arab Jerusalem population welcomed our presence, greeted warmly the newly available utilities and public services, and sought our tourism and the hope for a more prosperous future. I look back now at my own naivete, a "freier" amidst well-meaning people who actually believed that an occupation can be benevolent, permanent, and the best choice between two problematic possibilities. Fast forwarding to our own CCAR Convention in Atlanta recently, I recall how our own polity voted to cancel a trip to the Carter Center because of Jimmy Carter's poorly titled book which most of us probably had not even read. So there we were—the proud bearers of the legacy of the Religious Action Center, proud colleagues of the likes of Label Fein, the professional guild for some of the hard working leaders of Rabbis for Human Rights, Peace Now and B'Tselem, and sponsors of a progressive religious action center in Israel, deciding as an organization to punish a former president (not a particular friend of Israel, to be sure), for pushing dialogue in a direction that some felt pre-empted our apologetics.

So we need to hear the voice of Rawidowicz now more than ever: and David Myers' book is an opportunity to do just that, and to have at our fingertips a variety of tools that can serve us well in our partisan interests, and in our own stress over the moral compromises that face our beloved *M'dinat Yisrael*. This is an important piece of scholarship, blessed with good writing, and an exposure to ideas that few knew had been uttered in that time and in that place: the Boston of the 1950's, one of the important outposts of Eastern European intellectual passion; suited for America of the 2000's, the greater locus of fabulous success and tragic loss of direction.

William Cutter