



THE HOLOCAUST IS OVER: WE MUST RISE FROM ITS ASHES

Avraham Burg. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008. 272 pages.

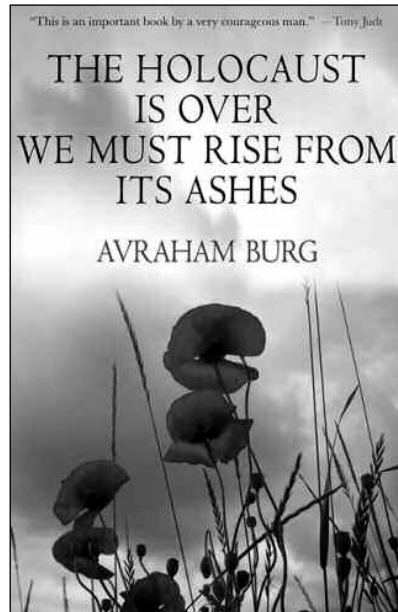
By *Bennett Muraskin*

Avraham Burg has a fascinating biography. His father, Joseph Burg, was a German Jew who arrived in Palestine in 1939 as a refugee from Nazism, and for many years led Israel's National Religious Party and served as a government minister. His mother's family lived in Hebron for generations before she was driven out in the 1929 anti-Jewish riots that killed over 100 Jews, including half her family.

Born in 1955 in Jerusalem, Avraham Burg is an observant Jew, yet has always been identified with the Israeli left. He joined Peace Now and participated in the the movement against the first Lebanon War in 1983. He was injured in the same grenade attack on a Peace Now demonstration that killed another protester, Emil Greenzweig. Entering the political mainstream, he was elected to the Knesset as a Labor Party candidate in 1988, became Speaker of the Knesset in the 1990s and mounted a serious challenge for leadership of the Labor Party in 2001. Along the way, he served as president of the two pillars of the Zionist establishment—the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization.

Burg's book, first published in Hebrew in 2007 as *Defeating Hitler*, has aroused a storm of controversy. For too long, Burg argues, Israel has been obsessed with the Holocaust. The slaughter of six million Jews in Europe has become internalized to the extent that Israelis view themselves as a nation of victims. Although armed with a powerful military, including nuclear weapons, and allied with the world's sole superpower, Israel

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acts as if it is threatened with annihilation. Its political discourse is laden with analogies to the plight of Jews in prewar Europe and with the Holocaust itself. "We have pulled the Shoah out of its historical context," writes Burg, "and turned it into a plea and generator for every deed. All is compared to the Shoah, dwarfed by the Shoah and therefore all is allowed—be it fences, sieges... curfews, food and water deprivation or unexplained killings. All is permitted because we have been through the Shoah and you will not tell us how to behave."

Burg uses the language of psychology to describe the mentality of the majority of Israeli Jews. Abused as a "child," it has become an abusive "parent." The suffering of Jews in Nazi Europe becomes the rationale to show no mercy to the Palestinians and other Arabs. First Nasser, then Arafat and Saddam Hussein, and now Hamas and Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmanidejad are equated with Hitler. Displacing their anger from Nazis to Arabs and Muslims, right-wing settlers and ultra-Orthodox fundamentalists have fostered a "Jewish racist doctrine," shared to varying degrees by mainstream

Israelis, that consider Arabs as inferior beings who do not deserve equal rights.

Ironically, Burg reminds us, the initial reaction to the Holocaust in Israel was one of shame. Jews supposedly went like sheep to the slaughter because they were mired in the slavish habits of the *galut* or exile. Holocaust survivors in Israel were discouraged from telling their stories. The turning point was the Eichmann trial in 1961, where testimony from Jewish victims broadcast live on the radio struck a powerful chord with the Israeli populace. This should have been a catharsis. Instead, according to Burg, it became "a theological pillar of modern Jewish identity" exploited by Zionist leaders to convince Jews that "the whole world is against us." Or, as he calls it, "a boundless paranoia that is no longer able to distinguish between friend and predator, a primitive suspicion of everyone, all the time, about every issue." Zionism promised to purge Jews of their "ghetto mentality." Instead Israel has reproduced it on a larger scale, continuing to believe "the entire world is against us."

Burg does a great service in shining a light on precursors to the Holocaust that did not involve Jews. Racist and imperialist ideolo-

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gies were also used to justify the extermination of the American Indians and the Armenians, and the Nazis themselves targeted the disabled, the Roma and communists in addition to Jews. In the first decade of the 20th century, Germany seized control of what is now called Namibia and wiped out hundreds of Africans, depicting their victims as subhumans. The Nazis drew on these examples in implementing the Final Solution.

Questioning Zionism is a cardinal sin throughout the Jewish world, even though it has a long history among Jews, including Vladimir Medem, Elmer Berger, Martin Buber, Hannah Arendt, Judah Magnes, Isaac Deutscher, Noam Chomsky and many others. Burg would like to see Israel become "a state of all its Jews and all its citizens with the majority determining its character." This would entail repealing the Law of Return that grants preferential immigration rights to Jews and all laws that discriminate between Jews and non-Jews. An ethno-religious state would give way to one based on humanistic Jewish values.

But Burg has a utopian streak that might leave some readers shaking their heads. While progressive Jews will agree that Israel has refused to recognize the

Armenian genocide committed by the Turks during World War One and supported Serbia during the Bosnian war in the mid-1990s despite its policy of ethnic cleansing directed against the Moslem population, can we really expect Israel to "declare moral war on China" for oppressive rule in Tibet, and to confront Indonesia on behalf of the people of East Timor? I like Burg's idea of adding exhibits at Yad Vashem depicting other genocides, but is it realistic to expect Israel to found an "International Court of Crimes Against Humanity" there?

The best traditions in Judaism, Burg avers, are now honoured more in the Diaspora than in the Jewish state. In order to return to them, he proposes, mixed groups of Jewish and Arab youth should be taken on a grand tour of Europe from Spain to Germany and Poland to explore both the Jewish and Muslim experience in Europe, past and present. Auschwitz should not be on the itinerary. Another trip should bring Israeli Jewish students to the U.S. to learn "how life with national meaning can be lived without an external enemy, and with full trust between Jews and the non-Jewish environment."

Within Israel itself, Burg advocates a new Judaism stripped of ethnic chauvinism. He would purge the concept of the "Chosen People" from the prayerbook and eliminate those commandments and rituals that segregate Jews and block the free exchange of ideas with other belief systems. Although he admits that God plays no role in human affairs, somehow he retains a belief in God as a force that inspires righteous conduct. He would like to see a World Religious Organization established in Israel to promote interfaith harmony, but

it appears to me that in this respect he is wasting his time. He has far more in common with secular humanists than with theists. Like secular humanistic Jews, he values the Jewish tradition that questions authority, respects the human dignity of non-Jews and accepts Hillel's dictum—"What is hateful to you do not do to others"—as the basis for morality. There is simply no need for a "God" in order to defend these principles.

Burg's arguments are not entirely new. Israel journalist Tom Segev explored the tortured relationship between Israelis and the Holocaust in his *The Seventh Million*, published in Hebrew in 1991 and in a 1993 English edition, and came to the same conclusions. Neither proposes that Israelis forget the Holocaust. Rather, they need to draw different lessons. As Burg has said, "There are two kinds of people coming out of Auschwitz. Those who said never again for the Jews and those like me who say never again for any human beings."

If Burg set out to provoke, he succeeded. The danger is that this book is too provocative, debunking too many Zionist sacred cows at once to earn a fair hearing. The Jewish establishment in Israel and elsewhere consider Burg *persona non grata*. A minority on the left, mainly youth, consider him a prophet. The following quote suggests why:

"A good Arab or righteous Gentile will be a brother to me. A wicked man even of Jewish descent is my adversary...Automatic Judaism, bereft of self-criticism and moral obligations, is to me an abominable race theory."

Let's hope that unlike so many other prophets, Burg is appreciated in his own time. ♦

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AN ANGEL...

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I gazed at the goblet in wonder and awe. "Oh!" I gleefully clapped my hands, convinced, at long last. "What a sloppy angel!" Daddy was satisfied. Auntie sat stewing over the ruin of her finest linen. She glowered at her youngest brother. Daddy met her smouldering glare

and softly, sweetly, in accented English, he reminded her, "You can't get mad from an angel."

The last Seder my father led was held in his own home. Our last Seder was our last supper. A week later, Daddy was felled by a massive coronary. My mother found him. He was wearing a smile. He had been getting ready to attend a hockey playoff game. ♦