



By David Cohen

Towards evening on Tuesday, October 3, 2006 the phone began to ring at the Polish consulate in New York City. The consul, Krzysztof Kasprzyk, remembered four calls, but there were likely more. They came from representatives of Jewish organizations – most prominently, it seems, from Abraham L. Foxman, National Director of the Anti-Defamation League, and David A. Harris, Executive Director of the American Jewish Congress. What were these calls about? A talk to be given that evening at the consulate by Tony Judt, Remarque Professor of History at New York University, titled “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy.”

The callers, consul Kasprzyk later recalled, were “very elegant.” They exercised a “delicate pressure” to cancel the talk—even though the consulate was not one of its sponsors but merely rented out space to sponsors of the event. Part of this delicate pressure, it seems, was the suggestion that allowing the speech to proceed could have negative consequences for Israeli-Polish diplomatic relations.

The talk was cancelled, and a media brouhaha ensued. Judt, whose prominence was then confined to academic circles, became an instant media star. Mark Lilla of the University of Chicago and Richard Sennett of New York University organized an academic protest on his behalf.

When Foxman was asked to explain his call to the Polish consulate, he said that Judt had taken the “position that Israel shouldn’t exist. That puts him on our radar.” Was this because Judt had five days previously spoken in favour of a recently published article on “The Israel Lobby” by two American professors, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt? Perhaps. But I think that Judt’s name first burned itself onto Foxman’s radar earlier, on October 23, 2003, when Judt published “Israel: An Alternative Future,” in *The New York Review of Books*.

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That article began: “The Middle East peace process is finished. It did not die: it was killed.” In the highly honed, declarative style that marks all Judt’s mature work, the article continued: “The problem with Israel . . . is that it arrived too late. It has imported a . . . late-nineteenth-century project into a world that has moved on, a world of individual rights, open frontiers, and international law.... Israel...is an anachronism.”

Judt, who as a youth in the 1960s was active in the left-Zionist Kibbutz Hame’uhad movement, then delivered a brief historical analysis of Israeli politics. The “middle ground” in Israeli politics was occupied by Likud. “Its major component is the late Menachem Begin’s Herut Party. Herut is the successor to Vladimir Jabotinsky’s interwar Revisionist Zionists, whose uncompromising indifference to legal and territorial niceties once attracted from left-leaning Zionists the epithet ‘fascist.’”

Judt continued: “When one hears Israel’s [then] deputy prime minister Ehud Olmert proudly insist that his country has not excluded the option of assassinating the elected President of the Palestinian Authority [Yasser Arafat], it is clear that the label fits better than ever. Political murder is what fascists do.”

Judt moved on to matters social in Israel: “Israel is a multicultural society in all but name; yet it remains distinctive among democratic states in its resort to ethno-religious criteria with which to denominate and rank its citizens. It is an oddity among modern nations not . . . because it is a *Jewish* state and no one wants the Jews to have a state; but because it is a *Jewish state* in which one community—Jews—is set above others, in an age when that sort of state has no place.”

Then he tackled the diaspora: “Diaspora Jews cannot influence Israeli policies, but they are implicitly identified with them, not least by Israel’s own insistent claims upon their allegiance. The behaviour of a self-described Jewish state affects the way everyone else looks at Jews....The depressing truth is that Israel today is bad for the Jews.”

What likely got Judt onto Foxman’s radar screen was the essay’s finale—an “idea” that he described in the final sentence as an “unpromising mix of realism and utopia....But the alternatives are far, far worse”: The idea was a binational state as a solution to the Middle East impasse.

“To convert Israel from a Jewish state to a binational one would not be easy, though not quite as impossible as it sounds: the process has already begun de facto. But it would cause far less disruption to most Jews and Arabs than its religious foes will claim....”

There is a certain irony to Judt’s 2003 proposal, given the present U.S. push for a two-state solution: “A binational state in the Middle East would require a brave and relentlessly engaged American leadership. The security of Jews and Arabs alike would need to be guaranteed by international force....A binational state would require the emergence, among Jews and Arabs alike, of a new political class. The very idea is an unpromising mix of realism and utopia, hardly an auspicious place to begin. But the alternatives are far worse.”

Unsurprisingly, Judt’s essay was included (as the

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final, crowning piece) in a collection of essays titled *Prophets Outcast: A Century of Dissident Jewish Writing about Zionism and Israel* (2004), edited by Adam Shatz.

Question: Did Judt's 2003 essay constitute a position that "Israel shouldn't exist"?

Answer: No. Judt was merely describing what he saw as a *de facto* process already in train. That process, as we know, has continued apace, spurred on by the Lebanon war, the evacuation, the blockade, the bloody incursion into Gaza in 2008, the recent Flotilla Incident, the ceaseless Israeli colonization of the West Bank, house demolitions and "political murders" too numerous to mention.

The intervening years have also seen a dawning of recognition among Israel's ruling elite (e.g., Olmert and Barak) that Israel must *choose*: It cannot be a Jewish state *and* a democracy at the same time, given the approaching demographic change that will make Palestinians a majority of the population in the area between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River.

In the meantime, Judt's own mortality has intervened. He passed away on August 9, 2010, aged 62, the victim of a slowly debilitating nervous system disease, ALS. He fought the disease with amazing persistence, producing a number of brilliant essays in *The New York Review of Books*. Much of this material was gathered in a book, *Ill Fares the Land*, published only a few months before his death.

One of the more incisive Judt obituaries came from the Israeli commentator Carlo Strenger, in the liberal daily *Ha'aretz*. A liberal himself, Strenger took excep-

tion to Judt's backing of the one-state solution, which he termed "thoroughly unrealistic"—without further explanation. Strenger then dealt with the "outrage" against Judt over his 2003 essay, which reminded him of "the reaction against Hannah Arendt and her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*." Strenger went on:

"Hannah Arendt is today hailed as one of the twentieth century's great political thinkers and an intellectual capable of keeping a mind of her own, even when criticized and attacked ferociously....In this she is similar to Tony Judt, and they exemplify a form of Jewish identity that evolved in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: irreverent, critical thinkers and writers who maintain independence of religious, national or political-group pressures."

Strenger then quoted from Judt's own correspondence, in which Judt described himself as writing in the "spirit of Jewish cosmopolitanism: caught somewhere between Marx's ruthless criticism of everything existing; pil-pul; zahor [zakhor]; bearing critical witness; social responsibility and perhaps a certain *davka*..."¹

Judt added: "It...makes me smile when American ultras accuse me of being 'unJewish' in my criticism of Israel....It seems to me, for good or evil, I am decidedly Jewish and in a long and worthy tradition."♦

¹"Pilpul" refers to the tradition of Talmudic debate and discussion; "Zakhor" means "remember," the ancient Biblical injunction that Judt as an historian made part of his life's mission; "Davka" means "despite everything," i.e., holding steadfastly to one's own point of view. — D.C.

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avoided speaking out about Israel have begun to find their voices. Reflecting this change, groups like Independent Jewish Voices in Canada and Jewish Voice for Peace in the U.S. have been created, bringing together Jews with experience in other forms of social activism in support of justice for Palestinians. At the same time, individual Jewish writers and analysts are bringing increasing energies to bear on this subject. As a result, Israel-related topics that had previously been taboo among Jews are now being openly discussed.

Until recently, many Jews have reflexively shied away from considering the obvious: that influential Jews and their organizations, acting in the name of **all** Jews, have used their influence to get the American and other governments to provide financial and military aid, as well as unconditional political support, to even the most racist, right-wing governments in Israel. It is essential that progressive Jews realize that people like Alan Dershowitz and organizations like B'nai Brith are providing unqualified support for the criminal mistreatment of other human beings. To say this is not anti-Semitic, but to stand up for the truth. Acquiescing to crimes simply because they are carried out by members of one's racial, ethnic or religious group is no more than primitive tribalism. Furthermore, such acquiescence is neither a moral nor an effective response to the threat of anti-Semitism. To the extent that prominent Jews take public positions tolerating or promoting injustice in the name of **all** Jews while other Jews remain silent, non-Jews can only conclude that

such views are shared by Jews generally. It is this that has a real potential to generate anti-Semitism. Jews, like everyone else, have both a moral responsibility and a self-interest to speak out against injustice, regardless of the identity of the perpetrators, and to promote a universal approach to social justice.

The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) has brought forth a justice-based approach to a resolution of the conflict. Instead of stipulating the final details that must be incorporated in a peace settlement—i.e. calling for a one-state or two-state solution—PACBI argues that a combination of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions should be used to promote a just settlement by compelling Israel, the overwhelmingly powerful party which enjoys unparalleled political and military support from the U.S. despite its increasingly egregious behaviour, to comply with international law and uphold universal human rights.

In support of this approach, a major international conference promoting BDS was recently held in Montreal. Independent Jewish Voices was one of the conference sponsors, and our members played an active role in organizing it. Our presence there provided non-Jews with an opportunity to find out about our perspectives and activities and enabled us to plan common efforts for the future.

It was an exhilarating experience to participate in the Montreal conference. As a human being who happens to be Jewish, I am delighted to see increasing numbers of Canadian Jews standing up for universal justice in Israel and Palestine.♦