

A Proverb Among All Nations

ANCIENT ZIONISM

The Biblical Origins of the National Idea.

By Avi Erlich. The Free Press. 277 pp. \$23

by Andrew J. Bacevich

The fervor of true nationalism finds few defenders today. Among the West's self-consciously cosmopolitan elites, the very concept of nationalism, once deemed perfectly respectable, has been sharply devalued since World War II. In fin de siècle America, the term *nationalistic* gets applied to the sort of people who plant billboards on the outskirts of small towns denouncing the United Nations or calling for a constitutional amendment against flagburning. In short, those understood to be part of the wacko fringe.

Nor is the problem confined to our own wackos. A truism of the present day—affirmed of late in the Balkans—is that the vestiges of nationalism are the bane of international politics: the source of perennial mischief, the inspiration for bloody rebellions and pointless wars, the cause of untold suffering.

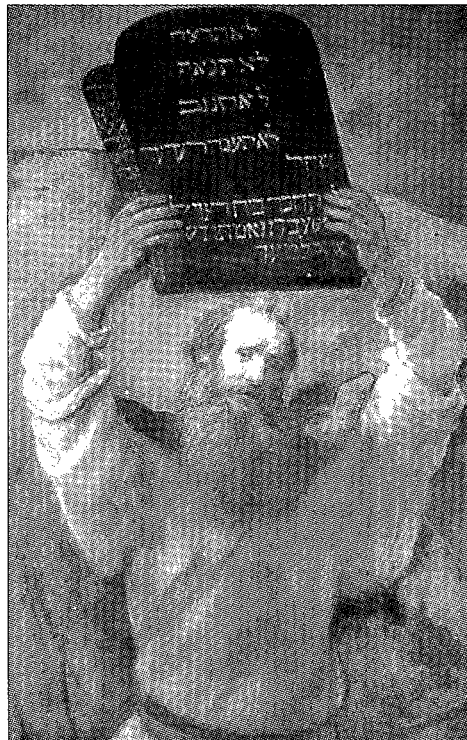
For all these reasons, received wisdom now considers the eradication of nationalism the chief prerequisite to ending the compulsive political maneuvering and grotesque militarism that have made the present century such a disaster. Diversity, tolerance, pluralism, and cooperation are the designated principles for organizing the politics of the future. The path to world harmony will be through institutions and instruments of power that are *multilateral, multinational, multiethnic, multicultural*.

The singular achievement of *Ancient Zionism* is to cast doubt on this received wisdom. In tracing the origins of the Zionist idea among the ancient Hebrews, Erlich, a literature professor turned neurologist, enlarges our understanding of nationalism, particularly its cultural and moral dimensions.

For Erlich, nationalism is not merely chauvinism touched up to lend it a semblance of legitimacy. Rather, he distinguishes authentic nationalism—what he calls “intellectual nationalism”—from a number

of counterfeits, both ancient and modern. Instead of being based on nature worship, simple possession, or imperial conquest, intellectual nationalism is based on the achieved unity of a particular territory with a particular idea of civilization.

Erlich traces this concept back to the historical experience of Abraham and his descendants, as recorded in the Authorized Version of the King James translation of the



Old Testament. His reading of that text—as essential to Western civilization as it is terse, elliptical, and poetic—is subtle and imaginative. On occasion, Erlich sees distinct shapes where others may see only shadows. But, taken as a whole, his argument is impressively solid.

Abraham himself is the principal hero of the story, praised for two

achievements of vast historical importance. The first was monotheism: the assertion of a "radical distinction between an everlasting creator and the mortals of His creation." Acknowledging the existence of a God who both precedes and transcends creation liberated the ancient Hebrews from idolatry, "mindless magic," and "the pretense that in death they might become gods." This rejection of "insensate materialism" was of decisive cultural significance. However fitful, the Hebrews' abandonment of false gods and human sacrifice (in Erlich's view, biblical shorthand for barbarism in general) became the cornerstone of a new civilization based on the values of "literacy, intellect, law, ritual, and poetry."

Abraham's second great achievement was the concept of "the Land"—the imbuing of a specific place with a specific cultural meaning. Promised by God to Abraham's descendants, Canaan became more than simply an abode. It became Zion, a symbol "chosen by God to represent the idea of God." Both dwelling place and unifying idea, Zion signified the covenant between God and the Hebrew people. As such, it also signified the introspective and imaginative culture to which that people aspired.

That the Hebrews often failed to live up to that high aspiration is well known to anyone familiar with the Scriptures—a point reaffirmed by Erlich's recounting of their ordeals. Yet his purpose is not to judge success or failure; it is to evoke the richness of the original Zionist ideal.

Properly understood, that ideal was, and is, "explicitly anti-imperialist." By investing the Land with cultural significance, Abraham recast the very definition of greatness. He rendered obsolete the "literal-minded materialism" that regards territorial expansion as the sole measure of greatness. "Once the Hebrews grasped the intellectual use of land," writes Erlich, "they understood the idea of empire as a destroyer of intellect."

Thus, in its earliest Zionist formula-

tion, nationalism neither inspires nor legitimizes conquest. The boundaries of a nation founded on true Zionist principles do not cramp or confine. Rather, they provide the security and protection that "enlightened nations" need in order to "build civilizations rather than empires."

Having developed his argument, Erlich does not shrink from applying it to the modern world. His discussion of the prospects for peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors, especially the Palestinians, is both principled and provocative. The reader need not agree with Erlich's position on this hotly disputed issue to find it a stimulus to thought.

Moreover, Erlich's argument has applications beyond the specific situation in the Middle East. His larger point is that, far from being the enemy of enlightenment, nationalism in its benign variants has fostered the conditions necessary for the creation of enlightened values. Viewed in the context of monotheistic religion and its transcendent moral imperatives, ancient Zionism made an essential contribution to humanity's precarious escape from barbarism.

Of course, the thoroughly secularized proponents of what today passes for advanced thinking are hell-bent on jettisoning that context. They view it as antiquated and insufficiently respectful of the autonomy of the individual. Yet to replace the absolute sovereignty of God with the absolute sovereignty of the individual may recreate a world in which human aspirations reach no higher than conquest, luxury, and tyranny. Provocative in the best sense, Erlich's book asks whether contemporary "enlightenment" offers hope for civilization, or whether it presages a return to the primitive state from which Abraham in his shrewd bargain with God once purchased humanity's release.

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