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Nationalists are turning Zionism into a childish religion

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Haaretz

November 19, 2010 - 12:00am

<http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/nationalists-are-turning-zionism-in...> [1]

November 19, 2010

Article Author(s): Doron Rosenblum

Media Outlet: Haaretz

Date: November 19, 2010

Source Link(s): <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/opinion/nationalists-are-turning-zionism-in...> [1]

The crowds of ministers and deputy ministers who surround Benjamin Netanyahu in their multitudes under the overall name "the government of Israel" sometimes seem like participants in a cantata or review: Every now and then, one of them gets up from among the semi-anonymous heads to make his voice heard - one with a trill in favor of annexation, another in a racist etude, yet another in an ethnocentric sermon, and another with a rational chirp. When one sits down, the next soloist gets up, while the Chorus of the Rock of our Existence follows him with background humming.

The soloist this week in the coalition's Cantata for Shwama was the Minister of Culture, Limor Livnat, perhaps a mezzo-soprano or perhaps a Wagnerian Heldentenor; she was pushed aside and almost forgotten in recent years, maybe because of the dominant voices of the basses and tenors that were more thunderous and coarse than hers. The argument over Ariel has brought her back from the abyss of ministerial forgetfulness, and with her an ancient voice - "Zionism."

As a reaction to the artists' boycott of performances at Ariel, Livnat announced that she would grant a special prize "for encouraging Zionist creativity" - a declaration that suddenly puts on center stage not only Ariel and not only the half-forgotten Minister of Culture, but the very definition of Zionism itself, all of them somehow under the same umbrella, in a somewhat pathetic fashion.

At a time when the prime minister is forcing on us "Jewish" music and a repertoire of dirges and lamentations there is, on the face of it, something refreshing in recollecting the term "Zionism," which at least has something of the spirit of this place, even if it is nostalgic. When

we hear mention of a "Zionist creation" our noses fill with the smell of manure, the fragrance of hay and youth movement songs. But could it be that when she thought about the prize, Livnat could hear the sound of songs of the underground movements and revolt as they were sung by her mother, Shulamit - as far as is known the only strong attachment the minister has to (a kind of) "culture."

But we should not err: If there was some renewed success for the term "Zionism" in recent times, this was mainly in a negative and defiant sense, by automatically affixing the derogatory terms "anti-Zionist" or "post-Zionist" to anyone who does not go along with the agenda of defiance and annexations, the rituals of blind worship of the Israel Defense Forces or whatever else, or anyone who simply sins by aspiring to normalization and peace.

Indeed, if we examine what in actual fact this contemporary "Zionism" is, beyond its being in opposition to "post-Zionism," we find that it held up by two poles - inertia and nostalgia. Its substance is based on the sanctification of historical conventions, to the extent that they are agreed upon, whether we are referring to "settlement" or "military victory," and the insistence on continuing them blindly because of the momentum of their being what they are, without relating to the changes and consequences.

From this point of view, "Zionism," at least in its "neo" form, has turned from a lofty, rational and pragmatic political program that changes according to the political circumstances, into a kind of religion - wizened, oppressively conservative and quite childish. To paraphrase a witticism written once about modernism by my late friend Eli Mohar, it can be said that "post-Zionism" is today being faced by a kind of "putz-Zionism" that is pompous and full of itself, reinforced by archaic rituals of symbolism and opposed to anything other than that.

From this point of view, the nationalistic right in Israel is trying to do to "Zionism" what the ultra-Orthodox Jews and religious parties did to "Judaism" - to appropriate these terms for themselves and exclude others from them. But here lies the ironic trap. By this very act of parcellation, the side carrying out the appropriation remains with a property that has lost at least half its value and importance. Because the very fact that most of the Israeli public accepts this exclusion almost without protest, its tacit agreement to having these properties taken out of its hands will testify like a thousand witnesses to the fact that anyway many of the people are not interested in the way the terms are redesigned and redefined by those who have appropriated them.

In other words, if "Zionism" is [MKs] Tzipi Hotovely and Danny Danon and the Zo Artzeinu movement, and if a "Zionist creation" is supposed to be defined by Limor Livnat, then thank you very much, many people say. We will find ourselves a different definition, if we have not already done so a long time ago.

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