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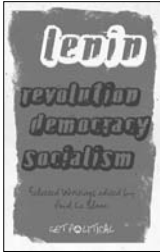
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*The Weight of Three Thousand Years*  
Forewords by Vidal, Said, Mezvinsky, Pappé

GET POLITICAL

# GET POLITICAL

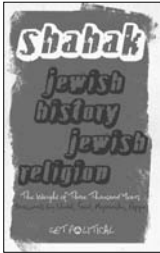
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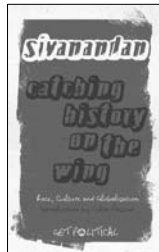
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## FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

*Gore Vidal*

Sometime in the late 1950s, that world-class gossip and occasional historian, John F. Kennedy, told me how, in 1948, Harry S. Truman had been pretty much abandoned by everyone when he came to run for president. Then an American Zionist brought him two million dollars in cash, in a suitcase, aboard his whistle-stop campaign train. 'That's why our recognition of Israel was rushed through so fast.' As neither Jack nor I was an antisemite (unlike his father and my grandfather) we took this to be just another funny story about Truman and the serene corruption of American politics.

Unfortunately, the hurried recognition of Israel as a state has resulted in forty-five years of murderous confusion, and the destruction of what Zionist fellow travellers thought would be a pluralistic state – home to its native population of Muslims, Christians and Jews, as well as a future home to peaceful European and American Jewish immigrants, even the ones who affected to believe that the great realtor in the sky had given them, in perpetuity, the lands of Judea and Samaria. Since many of the immigrants were good socialists in Europe, we assumed that they would not allow the new state to become a theocracy, and that the native Palestinians could live with them as equals. This was not meant to be. I shall not rehearse the wars and alarms of that unhappy region. But I will say that the hasty invention of Israel has poisoned the political and intellectual life of the USA, Israel's unlikely patron.

Unlikely, because no other minority in American history has ever hijacked so much money from the American taxpayers in order to invest in a 'homeland'. It is as if the American taxpayer had been obliged to support the Pope in his reconquest of the

Papal States simply because one third of our people are Roman Catholic. Had this been attempted, there would have been a great uproar and Congress would have said no. But a religious minority of less than two per cent has bought or intimidated seventy senators (the necessary two thirds to overcome an unlikely presidential veto) while enjoying support of the media.

In a sense, I rather admire the way that the Israel lobby has gone about its business of seeing that billions of dollars, year after year, go to make Israel a 'bulwark against communism'. Actually, neither the USSR nor communism was ever much of a presence in the region. What America did manage to do was to turn the once friendly Arab world against us. Meanwhile, the misinformation about what is going on in the Middle East has got even greater and the principal victim of these gaudy lies – the American taxpayer to one side – is American Jewry, as it is constantly bullied by such professional terrorists as Begin and Shamir. Worse, with a few honourable exceptions, Jewish-American intellectuals abandoned liberalism for a series of demented alliances with the Christian (anti-semitic) right and with the Pentagon-industrial complex. In 1985 one of them blithely wrote that when Jews arrived on the American scene they 'found liberal opinion and liberal politicians more congenial in their attitudes, more sensitive to Jewish concerns' but now it is in the Jewish interest to ally with the Protestant fundamentalists because, after all, 'is there any point in Jews hanging on, dogmatically, hypocritically, to their opinions of yesteryear?' At this point the American left split and those of us who criticised our onetime Jewish allies for misguided opportunism, were promptly rewarded with the ritual epithet 'antisemite' or 'self-hating Jew'.

Fortunately, the voice of reason is alive and well, and in Israel, of all places. From Jerusalem, Israel Shahak never ceases to analyse not only the dismal politics of Israel today but the Talmud itself, and the effect of the entire rabbinical tradition on a small state that the right-wing rabbinate means to turn into a theocracy for Jews only. I have been reading Shahak for years. He has a satirist's eye for the confusions to be found in any religion that tries to rationalise the irrational. He has a scholar's sharp eye for textual

contradictions. He is a joy to read on the great Gentile-hating Dr Maimonides.

Needless to say, Israel's authorities deplore Shahak. But there is not much to be done with a retired professor of chemistry who was born in Warsaw in 1933 and spent his childhood in the concentration camp at Belsen. In 1945, he came to Israel; served in the Israeli military; did not become a Marxist in the years when it was fashionable. He was – and still is – a humanist who detests imperialism whether in the name of the God of Abraham or of George Bush. Equally, he opposes with great wit and learning the totalitarian strain in Judaism. Like a highly learned Thomas Paine, Shahak illustrates the prospect before us, as well as the long history behind us, and thus he continues to reason, year after year. Those who heed him will certainly be wiser and – dare I say? – better. He is the latest, if not the last, of the great prophets.

## FOREWORD TO THE 1997 EDITION

*Edward Said*

Professor Israel Shahak, emeritus professor of organic chemistry at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, is one of the most remarkable individuals in the contemporary Middle East. I first met him and began a regular correspondence with him almost twenty-five years ago, in the aftermath first of the 1967 and then the 1973 war. Born in Poland, and having survived and then escaped a Nazi concentration camp, he came to Palestine immediately after World War Two. Like all young Israelis of the time, he served in the army, and for many years served in the military reserves for a short period every summer, as Israeli law requires. Possessed of a fierce, relentlessly inquisitive and probing intellect, Shahak pursued his career as an outstanding university lecturer and researcher in organic chemistry – he was often named the best teacher by his students, and given awards for his academic performance – and at the same time began to see for himself what Zionism and the practices of the state of Israel entailed in suffering and deprivation not only for the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza, but for the substantial non-Jewish (i.e. Palestinian minority) people who did not leave in the expulsion of 1948, remained, and then became Israeli citizens. This then led him to a systematic inquiry into the nature of the Israeli state, its history, ideological and political discourses which, he quickly discovered, were unknown to most non-Israelis, especially Diaspora Jews for whom Israel was a marvelous, democratic, and miraculous state deserving unconditional support and defense.

He then re-established and was for several years the Chairman of the Israeli League of Human Rights, a relatively small group of like-minded people whose idea it was that human rights should be equal for everyone, not just for the Jews. It was in that specific

context that I first became aware of his work. The one thing that immediately distinguished Shahak's political positions from that of most other Israeli and non-Israeli Jewish doves was that he alone stated the unadorned truth, without consideration for whether that truth, if stated plainly, might not be 'good' for Israel or the Jews. He was profoundly, and I would say aggressively and radically, un- and anti-racist in his writings and public statements; there was one standard, and one standard only, for infractions against human rights, so it did not matter if most of the time Israeli Jews were assaulting Palestinians, since he, as an intellectual, *had* to testify against those assaults. It is no exaggeration to say that so strictly did he adhere to this position that he very soon became an extremely unpopular man in Israel. I recall that about fifteen years ago he was declared dead, although of course he was extremely alive; the *Washington Post* reported his 'death' in a story which, after Shahak actually visited the *Post* to prove that he was not 'dead' he gleefully told his friends, had no effect on the *Post* which has never printed a correction! So to some people he is still 'dead', a wish-fantasy that reveals how uncomfortable he makes 'friends of Israel' feel.

It should also be said that Shahak's mode of telling the truth has always been rigorous and uncompromising. There is nothing seductive about it, no attempt made to put it 'nicely', no effort expended on making the truth palatable, or somehow explainable. For Shahak killing is murder is killing is murder: his manner is to repeat, to shock, to bestir the lazy or indifferent into galvanized awareness of the human pain that they might be responsible for. At times Shahak has annoyed and angered people, but this is part of his personality and, it must be said, of his sense of mission. Along with the late Professor Yehoshua Leibowitch, a man he deeply admired and often worked with, Shahak endorsed the phrase 'Judeo-Nazi' to characterize methods used by the Israelis to subordinate and repress the Palestinians. Yet he never said or wrote anything that he did not find out for himself, see with his own eyes, experience directly. The difference between him and most other Israelis was that he made the connections between



Zionism, Judaism, and repressive practices against ‘non-Jews’: and of course he drew the conclusions.

A great deal of what he writes has had the function of exposing propaganda and lies for what they are. Israel is unique in the world for the excuses made on its behalf: journalists either do not see or write what they know to be true for fear of blacklisting or retaliation; political, cultural, and intellectual figures, especially in Europe and the United States, go out of their way to praise Israel and shower it with the greatest largesse of any nation on earth, even though many of them are aware of the injustices of the country. They say nothing about those. The result is an ideological smoke screen that more than any single individual Shahak has labored to dissipate. A Holocaust victim and survivor himself, he knows the meaning of antisemitism. Yet unlike most others he does not allow the horrors of the Holocaust to manipulate the truth of what in the name of the Jewish people Israel has done to the Palestinians. For him, suffering is not the exclusive possession of one group of victims; it should instead be, but rarely is, the basis for humanizing the victims, making it incumbent on them *not* to cause suffering of the kind that they suffered. Shahak has admonished his compatriots not to forget that an appalling history of antisemitism endured does not entitle them to do what they wish, just because they have suffered. No wonder then that he has been so unpopular, since by saying such things, Shahak has morally undermined Israel’s laws and political practices towards the Palestinians.

Shahak goes even further. He is an absolute and unwavering secularist when it comes to human history. By this I do not mean to say that he is against religion, but rather that he is against religion as a way of explaining events, justifying irrational and cruel policies, aggrandizing one group of ‘believers’ at the expense of the others. What is also surprising is that Shahak is not, properly speaking, a man of the left. In a whole variety of ways he is very critical of Marxism, and traces his principles to European free-thinkers, liberals, and courageous public intellectuals like Voltaire and Orwell. What makes Shahak even more formidable as a supporter of Palestinian rights is that he does not succumb

to the sentimental idea that because the Palestinians have suffered under Israel they must be excused for their follies. Far from it: Shahak has always been quite critical of the PLO's sloppiness, its ignorance of Israel, its inability to resolutely oppose Israel, its shabby compromises and cult of personality, its general lack of seriousness. He has also spoken out forcefully against revenge or 'honor' killings against Palestinian women, and has always been a strong supporter of feminist liberation.

During the 1980s when it became fashionable for Palestinian intellectuals and a few PLO officers to seek out 'dialogue' with the Israeli doves of Peace Now, the Labor Party, and Meretz, Shahak was routinely excluded. For one, he was extremely critical of the Israeli peace camp for its compromises, its shameful practice of pressuring the Palestinians and not the Israeli government for changes in policy, its unwillingness to free itself from the constraints of 'protecting' Israel by not saying anything critical about it to non-Jews. For another, he was never a politician: he simply did not believe in all the posturing and circumlocutions that people with political ambitions were always willing to indulge. He fought for equality, truth, real peace and dialogue with Palestinians; the official Israeli doves fought for arrangements that would make possible the kind of peace that brought Oslo, and which Shahak was one of the first to denounce. Speaking as a Palestinian, however, I was always ashamed that Palestinian activists who were anxious to dialogue in secret or in public with the Labor Party or Meretz, refused to have anything to do with Shahak. For them he was too radical, too outspoken, too marginal with regard to official power. Secretly, I think, they also feared that he would be too critical of Palestinian policies. He certainly would have.

Aside from his example as an intellectual who never betrayed his calling or compromised with the truth as he saw it, Shahak performed an immense service over the years for his friends and supporters abroad. Acting on the correct premise that the Israeli press was paradoxically more truthful and informative about Israel than either the Arab or Western media, he has laboriously translated, annotated, and then reproduced and also dispatched