

JOEL KOVEL

OVERCOMING ZIONISM

**Creating a Single Democratic State
in Israel/Palestine**



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If you do not expect the unexpected, you will not find it, for it is
trackless and unexplored.

Heraclitus [fr 18]

Go on, builders in hope: tho Jerusalem wanders far away,
Without the gate of Los: among the dark Satanic wheels.

William Blake, *Jerusalem*, Plate 12: 42–43

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Prologue

What do you want with this particular suffering of the Jews? The poor victims on the rubber plantations in Putumayo, the Negroes in Africa with whose bodies the Europeans play a game of catch, are just as near to me. Do you remember the words written on the work of the Great General Staff about Trotha's campaign in the Kalihari Desert? "And the death-rattles, the mad cries of those dying of thirst, faded away into the sublime silence of eternity"

Oh, this "sublime silence of eternity" in which so many screams have faded away unheard. It rings within me so strongly that I have no special corner of my heart reserved for the ghetto: I am at home wherever in the world there are clouds, birds and human tears. . . .

Rosa Luxemburg, Letter From Prison, February 16, 1917¹

WHAT KIND OF JEW would write such a book as *Overcoming Zionism*, with its very harsh view of the State of Israel and equivalently radical recommendations for change—or what comes to the same thing, identifies with Rosa Luxemburg in her attitude about suffering and the ghetto? Not a good Jew, for sure. I ceased being that 60 years ago, with the first feeling that there was something confining about the ancestral religion. But not an uncaring one either. I wrote this book in fury about Israel and the unholy complicity of the United States and its Jewish community that grants it impunity. However, the "Jewish community" is no abstraction to me. It is the community from which I sprang, it inhabits me even if I do not inhabit it; it includes my family, and no degree of estrangement suffices to nullify the deep web of memory and conflict that links me to Jewry and shapes, however negatively, the foundations of who I am.

While reading Seymour Hersh's largely forgotten book about the development of Israel's nuclear bomb I was struck by an off-handed sentence that the "CIA had even been tipped off about the fact that Israel was raising large sums of money for Dimona from the American Jewish community."² This was by no means the most sensational of the startling revelations of Hersh's book. But not everybody who has read *The Samson Option* had a mother who bought Israel Bonds in his name and the name of his children. I had at the time winced and squirmed at receiving this "gift" (the German meaning—poison—aptly describes how I felt), and liquidated the holding as soon as I could—surreptitiously, it might be added, in order not to cause further deterioration in a relationship already strained to breaking point by conflict over Zionism. But there was little consolation in this. And learning many years later that my name could have been on funds that went into this monstrous venture only adds to the stew of emotion behind the present work.

Israel's nuclear arsenal, long helplessly accepted by the world, represents more than a strategic prize of incalculable menace. It also stands as perhaps the single greatest barrier to checking nuclear proliferation throughout the atomic era. Every American president from Eisenhower on (excluding George W. Bush, who wants Israel to have all weapons) has tried to check Israeli nuclear ambition, only to be driven back by Zionist political/financial muscle and manipulation of Holocaust guilt. Everybody in power knew this but was not to speak of it, and so the United States' effort to rein in the spread of weapons of supreme death, however compromised to begin with, became permanently crippled.

So it was not simply "making the desert bloom" with the trees my mother had planted in my name; our family could well have materially supported nuclear proliferation. I can say with reasonable confidence that mother would have thought this was right, for she had imbibed the full glass of Zionist absolutism. She would have agreed with the preponderant sentiment, that

given the persecution suffered by Jews and its awful crescendo in the Holocaust, all measures, the Bomb included, had to be taken to stave off future efforts at extermination. She would likely not have gone so far as the unnamed Israeli official, enraged over President Eisenhower's squashing of the 1956 invasion of the Sinai,* whom Hersh chillingly quoted: "We got the message. We can still remember the smell of Auschwitz and Treblinka. Next time we'll take all of you with us."³ But she would have resonated with what he meant. This was the climate in which I was raised.

Both parents had come to the United States in the early years of the last century, in the great trek from miserable, pogrom-ridden Tsarist Ukraine through the Lower East Side, Brooklyn and the Bronx, and onward to Long Island and finally the retirement communities of South Florida. Workers and small shopkeepers in the Old World, they became bourgeoisified in the New. I was the firstborn in the American Promised Land on both sides of the family, was suitably lionized as a child, and had a successful career, which led me into the medical profession, and then into psychiatry and psychoanalysis. As a youth I was never Zionist as such but felt an uneasy pride that our people had hewn a new and different kind of life out of what seemed to be an uninhabited wilderness. I celebrated with everyone else the inauguration of the State of Israel as a twelve-year-old, took my Bar Mitzvah in stride, moved in liberal Zionist circles as a rising psychiatric star, and felt panic at the threat to Israel in June 1967, then exultation at its six-day victory over what we all took to be barbaric Arab hordes.

* A joint venture of Israel, who wanted to strike a blow against Egyptian President Nasser; and England and France, who wanted to restore their colonial control over the Suez Canal. Eisenhower, widely taken for a golf-obsessed dolt, showed everybody just who was boss in the post-war era. But although Eisenhower must be judged as the American president least sympathetic to Israel, he had no better luck than any other in overturning security needs justified by memories of Holocaust, and so the Israeli Bomb went ahead under his watch just as it did under all the others.

How did so conventionally bred a young man reject his roots to develop ideas of the sort found in this book? My brother and eleven cousins came through similar circumstances with relatively little perturbation, more or less reproducing the values of their parents. I had had little difficulty in adapting to the ways of the world, and was well on my way toward a prominent academic career. But the pull of something within me began to supervene, “*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*,”⁴ and continued.

Something of the process had to do with childhood relationships that formed fracture-lines in my soul. Chief among these were with my father, the saturnine Louis Kovel, and his youngest sister, my Aunt Betty. Both were contrarians, though of greatly different stripe. Lou Kovel was a good man in many ways; politically, however, he was a vile reactionary, even a kind of fascist. He seemed to disagree with everybody in our circle, which was conventionally left-of-center. Having read Oswald Spengler, father spent his days ranting about the decline of the West, the perfidy of leftists (including me as I grew into this way of thinking) and Soviet sympathizers—and the corresponding need for strong figures like Spain’s General Franco, our own strongman General Douglas MacArthur, and the infamous Senator Joe McCarthy. Notably, father hated Zionism, and quarreled bitterly with my mother and everybody else in our circle about it. His reasoning on the subject was scarcely what I have come to adopt, compounded as it was from a hatred of Zionist “socialism” and a conviction, partially true but profoundly wrong-headed, that serious affection for Israel entailed disloyalty to the United States and its supreme mission of running the world for the benefit of big business. Life was trying, to say the least, with Lou Kovel, though one had to admire his fierce independence of mind and raw intellectual power. No doubt, father tutored me in the ways of dissension—both from him and through him. His disagreeability helped

me to think for myself, to take nothing for granted, and to not fear going against a compact majority.

Betty was something else. She shared her big brother's independence of mind, but went in the opposite direction. Where father was a rigid patriarch, Betty was the first emancipated woman in my life, and a fount of radical verve. In the barren conformism of my family, she stood for setting forth on uncharted paths, and also for mocking authority, that is, Lou Kovel. I have no recollection what Betty's views on Zionism were, but she was notorious in the family for being a freethinking atheist. She was, in short, a Jew who did not affirm Judaism. This was to have dramatic consequences when Betty fell ill with a horrible ovarian cancer and died during my seventeenth year. Her funeral was conducted according to her wishes, in non-Jewish fashion. This seemed unexceptional to me, if tedious. But it incited a dreadful scene afterwards in which I overheard three surviving aunts denouncing Betty for her falling away from the Jewish faith, thereby depriving them of the spiritual pleasure of a proper Jewish funeral. The effect on me was apocalyptic, and sealed my heart against the ancestral religion.

The agony at Betty's funeral proved the *coup de grâce* of a long process of alienation from Judaism. As a boy I remember dissatisfaction with the rituals of the faith, boredom at synagogue, a rolling of the eyes at Seder, and a lack of interest in Judaism's theology. I considered Hebrew school to be a kind of dungeon keeping me from the streets, where true life was to be lived. I set out deliberately to not learn the language and refused to do my exercises, instead doodling football plays and fantasizing about prison escapes while the instructor intoned about the Torah and the Covenant through which God had made the Jews special among the nations. In consternation, my mother sent me to a tutor, but this only worsened matters. The man was young, and his wife and children padded silently around the cramped and dim apartment as he tried to lay out