



Israel as Cultural Icon

The Vacillating Boundaries of Jewish Identity

Lies are often much more plausible, more appealing to reason, than reality, since the liar has the great advantage of knowing beforehand what the audience wishes or expects to hear.

—HANNAH ARENDT, *CRISES OF THE REPUBLIC* (1972)

On an ordinary day in the spring of 2008, I was navigating throngs of thirsty and hungry students between classes at Virginia Tech's Squires Student Center, in pursuit of a watery but much-needed cup of coffee. After emerging from the energetic and impatient crowd, I saw that I had a bit of time before my next class and decided to drop by the multicultural student office down the hall so I could chat with its director, a friendly and intelligent man. My friend wasn't in the office, but the trip nevertheless ended up being instructive. Adorning the modestly sized anteroom of the multicultural center were dozens of Israeli flags in various sizes, covering nearly every visible surface of the room, along with pamphlets extolling Israel's exceptionalness or decrying its poor reputation and continually embattled status. It turned out it was Jewish Awareness Month at Virginia Tech, but I had difficulty understanding what awareness of Jewish culture has to do with puffery of a nation-state and recapitulation of its propaganda. I had even more difficulty understanding why the promotion of Israel would be housed in an office devoted at least nominally to intercultural understanding and the elimination of racism. My goal in this chapter is to use systematic cultural and political analysis to make some sense of these phenomena, particularly the ways that Israel and Jewish culture are conflated to varying ends and with varying levels of sincerity.

I should make clear that I'm skeptical of the utility of any multicultural office in a university setting as an agent of justice. There are many reasons for this skepticism. The primary one is an understanding that most offices of multicultural affairs are entrenched institutionally and therefore beholden to institutions, not to the people most in need of intervention (minority students, poor students, underpaid support staff, landscapers and janitors, and so forth). I also find problems with many of the philosophical and political manifestations of multiculturalism as an attitude and a prescription for social interaction. These are matters I examine later in this chapter and throughout this book. I add a qualification here: although I am pessimistic about the possibilities of extant multicultural discourses as an antidote to racism, I am not at all opposed to the creation of spaces under the rubric of multiculturalism where students and staff can hang out, hold events, and create educational programs. Such spaces are useful and necessary. I simply don't see them as transformative structurally vis-à-vis the institutions in which they are housed. There are other ways to think about the effective contestation of racism and the constructive exchange of cultural practices; I consider some of these other ways in my analysis of the political uses of cultural identity.

As to Virginia Tech's multicultural office, I was disturbed to see what for many students are symbols of ethnic cleansing festooned all over one of the designated safe spaces on campus. (The "safe space" is another liberal concept I find troublesome. Does its existence mean that hate is justified everywhere else? Or that discomfort is verboten?) I wasn't terribly surprised, though, because I know that on college campuses support of Israel is a prerequisite of responsible multicultural citizenship. The director of the multicultural office probably doesn't have strong feelings about the Israel-Palestine conflict (I am venturing a guess here; despite our friendship, it's not something we've ever discussed). And he would never consciously be party to an act of cultural insensitivity. His willingness to display a controversial symbol in an office dedicated to students of color simply reflects the success Zionists have had in marketing Israel as a quixotic experiment appropriate for multicultural celebration. Israel is a natural outcome of multicultural consciousness, according to many Zionists, and so it is perfectly normal to include (or privilege) it in proud displays of diversity.

I considered telling my friend that the display of Israel's flag is inappropriate because for some it signifies hostility and because celebration of a settler-colonial state shouldn't fall under the purview of a multicultural office (or any institution with moral decency). I ultimately demurred, however, for a few reasons: it is not my business to tell another person how to run his office; the level of Zionist entrenchment on our campus is such that it would take a superhuman effort to dislodge it; and a superhuman effort to dislodge Zionism from a multicultural office is not the best place to direct our energy, because even if such a move were to be successful, it's not always the most fruitful site of contestation. I would like to dislodge Zionism from political systems instead.

These aren't easy goals to work out. They are accompanied by a variety of ethical and strategic complexities that demand careful analysis. This chapter undertakes that sort of analysis, which I extend throughout the remainder of the book. In particular, I examine the relationship between discourses of multiculturalism and celebration of Israel. This relationship is most frequently cultivated in the context of liberal democratic notions of progress and modernity. As enlightened as advocates of these notions fancy themselves, they are ideas in fact deeply connected to the colonial epistemologies of an era that never quite achieves the status of bygone.

The Problems of Synchronous Politics and Culture

Much of the so-called culture wars of the past decade have focused on perceptions of the Middle East and the accusations of anti-Semitism that frequently accompany criticism of Israel. A number of books have been published in recent years either affirming or challenging the conflation of anti-Semitism and criticism of Israel.¹ Most of these books discuss the technical and moral dimensions of anti-Semitism and apply these discussions to particular conceptions of Israel's ethnic character and military behavior. There has not been enough close reading of the rhetorical and discursive features of the conflation of anti-Semitism and criticism of Israel. We must think about the conditions in which Israel supposedly inspires anti-Semitism. The conflation in question is framed mainly by the popular construction of Israel as a state coterminous with an ethnic group. Most of Israel's supporters are adamant that Israel

is a state for all Jews, and thus an entity that cannot be detached from ethnicity. This condition is common to most nation-states, but in the case of Israel the juxtaposition of national belonging and ethnic background is explicit juridically and rhetorically. It is not Israel's enemies but its advocates who juxtapose Israeli citizenship and Jewish identity. In other words, if it is true that Israel evokes anti-Semitism, then according to their own logic it is primarily the fault of Israel's most passionate supporters.

It is not my goal to assign the blame for the existence of anti-Semitism to anybody. Racism, a category in which anti-Semitism belongs, is a complex phenomenon, dynamic and multivalent. The blame for racism ultimately rests in the existence of injustice from which individuals or groups benefit economically, psychologically, or politically. Individuals, governments, and corporations also play a prominent role in its survival. I want to be clear that I am not blaming anti-Semitism on Jews, then. I am, however, making the crucial distinction between the existence of anti-Semitism as a historical affliction and the ardent defense of Israel as necessarily Jewish and how that sort of discourse facilitates its dissemination. More important, that sort of discourse places a type of onus on Israel that its supporters would surely consider unsavory, which is to act as an emissary for Jews throughout the world. In defending Israel's eternal and inherent Jewish nature, its supporters have no choice but to reinforce that onus. This defense isn't so much a Faustian bargain as it is a starkly utilitarian choice that has far-reaching consequences for the many people whose lives are affected by Israel's comportment and identity.

An especially rich site of discovery for the coagulation of Jewish and Israeli identity is the college campus, where societal debates often convene in microcosmic form. The colonization of Virginia Tech's multicultural office by Zionists is a manifestation of a certain politics that many Jewish organizations cultivate. Virginia Tech's Jewish community, usually through the sponsorship of Hillel and Friends of Israel at the university, hosts an annual Jewish Awareness Month every spring in conjunction with the office of Multicultural Programs and Services, which assists all student groups with cultural awareness celebrations.

I like the idea of a Jewish Awareness Month. As a college student I participated eagerly in programs of awareness of Arab cultures

(and politics, though the groups with which I worked were careful to separate the two as much as possible). We even gave our events silly titles like Palestine Awareness Week, Arabian Nights, and Arab Awareness Month, the kinds of program names that are campus standards. Helping to organize these events played a huge role in my intellectual development; I am a proponent of student involvement in political causes and cultural celebrations. I encourage my students at Virginia Tech to participate in the various extracurricular initiatives on campus. Much of the programming associated with Jewish Awareness Month at Virginia Tech effectively illuminates both serious and lighthearted elements of Jewish culture to non-Jewish audiences. Thus it plays an important role in the cultural interchange that is supposed to occur on a college campus. This cultural interchange isn't all hugs and smiles, though. It often takes place in contested arenas; the contestations frequently occur around race and religion. Despite the lack of empirical evidence, I would guess that conflicts between Jewish and Arab student groups are the most common these days. Moreover, the act of sharing a cultural tradition or expression is never neutral. The act inevitably entails a version or interpretation of cultural practice, often representative of a majority population, that is at least implicitly determined by politics.

Celebration of Jewish culture in the United States frequently is inseparable from political support of Israel. This style of celebration represents a particular version of cultural practice but appears to be the predominant mode of exhibiting Jewishness in rehearsed settings. Virginia Tech's 2008 Jewish Awareness Month, for example, had eighteen listed events. Of these eighteen events, six promoted Israel. The 2009 Jewish Awareness Month featured ten events devoted in some way to Israel. Zionism is a normative dimension of Jewishness in this schema. I collected information about other Jewish culture groups around the country, and it shows that Virginia Tech's is not an anomaly. The College of New Jersey Hillel features an Israel festival. The University of Oklahoma has an Israel festival with big-name speakers, including one year the state's governor. Duke University's Jewish Awareness Week includes an Israel Day, displayed prominently in the week's advertisement, featuring a hookah and what is supposed to be Israeli food (hummus and pita bread). Many of these Jewish Awareness celebrations are remarkably

similar in content and political outlook. They also employ comparable promotional strategies, which can best be described as an attempt to sound as hip and apolitical as possible. Duke's graphic shows Stars of David in the manner of Caribbean vacation advertisements and promises "cool Israeli T-Shirts."

Virginia Tech's 2008 Jewish Awareness Month kicked up the hip factor even more, titling the proceedings "Judaism Y'all: Beyond Dreidels and Bagels." The month featured an ongoing "Best Bar Mitzvah Day Ever," along with a "Gay Shabbat" and a "Chocolate Seder." The program didn't actually get too far beyond the dreidel or the bagel, but it did find room for the preparation of "traditional Israeli" food such as couscous and hummus. The events at Duke and Virginia Tech are exemplary of the types of programs sponsored by Hillel across the country: they feature fun-loving portrayals of Jewish culture blended with ostensibly hip (but invariably tacky) promotion of Israel as chic and convivial. The apolitical presentation of Israel belies the implicitly politicized nature of the programming. It is a highly tendentious act to conceptualize Israel as timeless and normative, as if it has always been where Palestine once stood. It requires moxie and overconfidence to ignore the brutal colonial war it has long been waging. Then there is the shameless pilferage of Palestinian cuisine, among dozens of other appropriations (music, *arqeela*, dress); these infidelities include the standard (and hopelessly clunky) white appropriation of black cultural expression. The Duke Friends of Israel logo even deftly includes all of Palestine in its silhouette of Israel.

These tendentious acts aren't necessarily orchestrated, but they are interconnected. Hillel is almost always involved in the promotion of Israel on campus either as a sponsor or an organizer. Hillel is headquartered in Washington, D.C., and has a presence on every major campus in the United States. A close reading of its educational materials illustrates that it is deeply committed to Israel and eager to promote the state as a beacon of modernity through slick promotional campaigns. Criticism of Israel is verboten in Hillel discourse. The organization has been working hard since the emergence of pro-Palestine voices to prepare its local chapters for what it conceptualizes as an onslaught of perplexing and aggressive opposition. It is also invested in marketing strategies for Israel that ignore its military occupation of the West Bank

and emphasize instead its wealth of American-style modernity. Hillel doesn't treat the Israel-Palestine conflict as a solvable dispute that requires dialogue and a just resolution. It approaches the conflict as a propaganda contest in which Israel must be defended as a matter of principle. Hillel's depoliticization of Israel's colonial mandate facilitates its marketing strategy. When groups opposed to Israel's policy criticize the state, Hillel relies on a decontextualized victimology, one that evokes the Holocaust and anti-Semitism without mentioning Jewish violence in Israel, to reframe the issue from one of colonization to one of unfair persecution. Because Israel is inscribed in the daily observance of Jewish culture, to criticize it is to simultaneously perform an attack against the Jewish people. This logic underlies Hillel's claims to multicultural belonging.

In campus promotions, Israel is usually described as follows:

- A land that's fun and effervescent
- A fabulous place for study abroad
- A great opportunity for American Jews to connect to their culture
- A promised land of multicultural splendor, representing Jews from over fifty countries
- A thriving democracy surrounded by hostile, undemocratic enemies
- An exotic nation housing an uninterrupted ancient culture
- A place with a punchy, unlikely origin as a David against intractable Arab Goliaths
- The exclusive territory of Jews from around the world

The most noteworthy facet of these representations of Israel is not what they describe, but what they omit. There is rarely mention of Arabs or Palestinians as anything other than existential threats to Israel. There is never acknowledgment of Israel's military occupation or even of its colonial origin; Israel is invented as a timeless entity liberated from the tyranny of Great Britain and the obstructionism of the Arabs. These portrayals represent more than just putting a good foot forward. They arise from a meticulous campaign to market Israel on college campuses as a modern antidote to the barbarity of the Arabs and their dubious supporters.

Hillel, which operates on a budget of more than \$40 million, devotes much of its attention to Israel's image.² The organization bills itself as a gathering space for Jewish students and a civic advocate of Jewish culture, but its purview is not limited to innocuous community-building activities. It makes a concerted effort to prepare students for conflict with those it deems hostile to Israel. It also supports Israel from the radically conventional perspective of its state policy justifications. An analysis of Hillel's Summit 2008, "Imagining a More Civil Society: The University and the Jewish Community," shows the organization to be paradoxically slavish but pugnacious. The gathering featured the usual cadre of heavy hitters, from Hillel brass like Edgar Bronfman and Wayne Firestone to numerous university deans and presidents. The introductory letters to the conference feature the vague platitudes typical of over-produced or corporate functions (e.g., "We'll develop the skills to promote civility, acceptance, and conflict resolution"; "As we imagine a more civil society, we will focus deeply on discourse itself and also on activities that foster safe dialogue and productive contributions to society"; "We will demonstrate what we hope to lead on campus: respectful, authentic conversations in which we hold multiple truths simultaneously, listening carefully while articulating our own thoughts and opening ourselves to letting go and learning anew").³ These are sentiments befitting a summit complete with a green consciousness, whose packet boasts that only fair-trade coffee will be served and leftover food will be donated to D.C. Central Kitchen. The production resembles a Young Democrats conference with an ethnic twist.

Nowhere in the packet's front matter is there mention of Israel. The great majority of presentations likewise avoid the topic, concentrating instead on such topics as philanthropy, dialogue, technology, diversity, and service learning. The only geographical space identified in the program is Darfur, the darling issue of organized Jewish activism. Yet Hillel's devotion to Israel is no secret; an entire section of its website is reserved for promotion of Israel as a destination for students and a nation worthy of unqualified support. Hillel proclaims that "Israel touches on dimensions of collective and national Jewish identity and is intrinsically linked to Jewish Peoplehood."⁴ Israel, Hillel continues, "as a multi-dimensional, dynamic and constantly evolving idea and reality provides a flexible

and rich set of entry points into Jewishness, Jewish identity and Jewish community for our students.”⁵ Hillel greatly emphasizes study abroad and birthright programs, reflecting the deep desire of Zionists to outfit Israel with a normative status. Taglit-Birthright Israel seems to be a typical travel opportunity for students, but it is terribly disquieting upon inspection. It is reserved only for Jewish students, which is a huge problem morally and politically: American Jews are not indigenous to Israel but other people are—the unmentioned Palestinians who are excluded from these trips and in most cases from Israel altogether. Moreover, the very notion of a birthright vis-à-vis a geopolitical entity contravenes every possible articulation of liberal humanism or democratic citizenship. Hillel even constricts eligibility for Taglit-Birthright to non-Israeli Jews who haven’t lived in Israel past the age of twelve. This reinforces its firm juxtaposition of Israel, a manifest nation-state, with deterritorialized Jews who have a genealogical claim to the symbolic, exclusive space Israel represents.

Is there a connection between Hillel’s eschewal of Israel at its summit and its enthusiastic advocacy of Israel on campus? It may appear that any connection between these apparently divergent strategies would be only tenuous, but in fact there is an important connection that allows us to better understand the discourses of Jewish nationhood as they relate to the state of Israel. Hillel endeavors to do two things generally: encourage civic responsibility and promote the state of Israel. In Hillel’s moral schema, these two goals are not exclusive, but aligned. This occurrence of synchronous politics and culture has devastating consequences. By proclaiming that being a good citizen includes supporting Israel, Hillel renders ethnonationalism a central element of civic responsibility. Its philosophy is ethnonationalist because it reserves access to a specific national land for only one ethnic group at the direct expense of other groups with greater claim to that land morally and historically. Hillel’s policy statement on Israel makes this position clear: “Hillel is steadfastly committed to the support of Israel as Jewish and Democratic State with secure and recognized borders and as a member of the family of free nations.”⁶

Because Israel has over a million Palestinian citizens who suffer institutional discrimination and rules over 4.5 million other Palestinians in the Occupied Territories who have no civil rights,

Hillel's collation of Judeocentrism and democracy is empirically untrue. Even the idea of Israel itself as a Jewish state is more mythology than reality. In making this assertion, I draw a distinction between Israel as it has been invented in Zionist discourses of Jewish ownership and the actual nation-state that has long been conflicted over its secular self-image and its perpetually crisis-stricken ethnocentric demography. The marketing of Israel is quite different from its existential realities, which often reveal ugly behavior that arises inevitably from a situation in which ethnic origin dictates belonging and citizenship. There is only so much bragging about democracy that a nation can do when it prevents an indigenous population from accessing even the most basic rights of citizenship. When I made the claim that the juxtaposition of civic responsibility and support of Israel has devastating consequences, I did not intend it to be hyperbolic. In the following section, I examine what it means to offer such a juxtaposition and analyze some of its inherent moral fallacies.

Israel and Multicultural Reverie

Much of the moral dubiousness I identify can be located in Taglit-Birthright, merely on the basis of its painful suggestiveness and apart from its problems as an actual travel-abroad program. The very notion of a birthright—of the right to make a political claim based solely or primarily on a biological identification—is profoundly unjust and has repeatedly caused bloodshed throughout history, especially during the era of European colonization. The continued usage of birthright as a historical claim is currently causing bloodshed in Palestine, a devastating variety resulting from settler colonization, in which Hillel directly implicates itself by promoting this base form of biological determinism. The idea of exclusive access based on biology or ethnic identification belies every meaningful form of civic responsibility.

At this point the conflation of civic responsibility with support for Israel becomes most damning. By promoting Taglit-Birthright as central to its mission, Hillel becomes in essence an ethnonationalist organization. There is no reason why Hillel should not thus be banned from participating in any form of multicultural celebration. It patently rejects any form of multicultural participation in

its main policy issue. Yet according to a certain logic there is no contradiction between Hillel's ethnonationalism and its supposed commitment to multicultural participation as exemplified by its 2008 summit. That logic pervades discourses of American multiculturalism in general, suggesting that customary shows of support for Israel enhance multicultural community. In many multicultural communities, this support has become perfunctory (in Virginia Tech's, for example). Israel and Jewishness so ardently become coterminous that agents of multicultural celebration come to believe that excluding Israel from activities is the same as excluding Jews. This belief usually comes into existence through the inverse: Jewish Zionists use the coterminous relationship of Israel and Jewishness to interject promotion of Israel into multicultural celebration.

What are the ethical consequences of the coterminous relationship of Israel and Jewishness? They are many, none of them positive. First of all, it means that Israel cannot be included in multicultural celebrations without reflecting negatively on Jewish people, many of whom do not want to be identified in any way with the nation-state or who do not want the nation-state to be their primary cultural identity. Second, it entraps Jewish people in an unsavory paradigm, one in which they perform gruesome acts because of their culture. If Israel is the embodiment of Jewish culture, then it is being entrusted with a sort of authority that no nation-state can execute favorably. Herein lies the main problem of conjoining culture and national character. Hillel and other Jewish civic organizations render themselves distinctly responsible for Israel's violence by proclaiming themselves guardians of the state's consciousness. Moreover, they perform a nonconsensual appropriation of all Jewish people into the service of state policies that render the culture indefensible along with the state policies that are said to arise from the culture. It is never a good idea, even through the trope of strategic essentialism, to link an ethnic group to a military apparatus. Such a move automatically justifies discourses—in this case anti-Semitic ones—that should never be justifiable.

These issues exist within the broader problem of cultural identity as it is located in the construct of the nation-state. As Iris Marion Young explains, "States are public authorities that regulate the activities of those within their jurisdictions through legal and administrative institutions backed by the power to sanction."⁷