



The Wandering Who? A study of Jewish identity politics, gives a unique insider's view of the Israeli mind. Its author explains to Eric Walberg that you can take the girl out of Jezebel, but you can't take Jezebel out of the girl

Gilad Atzmon is a world citizen who calls London his home. He was born a sabra, and served as a paramedic in the Israeli Defense Forces during the 1982 Lebanon War, when he realised that "I was part of a colonial state, the result of plundering and ethnic cleansing." He has wandered far since then, become a novelist, philosopher, one of the world's best jazz saxophonists, and at the same time, one of the staunchest supporters of the Palestinian cause, supporting their right of return and the one-state solution. He now defines himself as a "proud self-hating Jew" and "a Hebrew-speaking Palestinian". In 2009 Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan quoted Atzmon during a debate with Israeli president Shimon Peres, telling him at the World Economic Forum that "Israeli barbarity is far beyond even ordinary cruelty."

Atzmon denies that there is even such a concept as "anti-Semitism", stating that "anti-Semite" is an empty signifier. "You are either a racist which I am not, or have an ideological disagreement with Zionism, which I have." When railed against as an anti-Semite, Gilad quotes the witticism: "While in the past an 'anti-Semite' was someone who hates Jews, nowadays it is the other way around, an anti-Semite is someone the Jews hate."

One of his Orient House Ensemble's nine albums, appropriately called "Exile", with its arresting blend of Middle Eastern and Western themes, was BBC jazz album of the year in 2003. His fascination with Arab music was a natural development out of his embrace of the Palestinian cause. Arab music "must be internalised, reverting to the primacy of the ear".

His unique blend of jazz and radical politics means his performances are picketed and

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sometimes



disrupted. But the gregarious Gilad relished the opportunity to reach out to even his most strident critics, always engages the picketers and even invites them to coffee and an extended chat after the performance. Peter Bacon wrote that Atzmon reminds us of “the strong link between jazz and the radical politics that are sometimes the only way to ensure its -- and our -- freedom.”

Atzmon's novel *My One and Only Love* features as a protagonist a trumpeter who chooses to play only one note (extremely well) as well as a spy who uncovers Nazi war criminals and locks them inside double bass cases which then tour permanently in the protagonist's orchestra's luggage. His intent was to explore “the personal conflict between being true to one's heart and being loyal to The Jews”.

There is a growing movement within Israel itself of such courageous public figures, who realise that only a radical reversal of the entire Zionist project to create a Jewish state in the Middle East can lead to peace. *Al-Ahram Weekly* reviewed Atzmon's erstwhile colleague Israel Shamir's *Masters of Discourse* in 2008.

In an interview with the *Weekly*, Atzmon explained that while there is Judaism the religion, there is no Jewish race or even ethnicity, but only a Jewish ideology -- what he calls Jewishness. “At a certain stage when it became clear to me that Jews do not form a racial or ethnic continuum, I realised that I would have to search for answers somewhere else. It was also obvious to me that though Jews are not a race, Jewish politics is clearly racist to the bone.” Thus, the genesis of *The Wandering Who*

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This applies to every form of Jewish politics, whether it be Israeli domestic or foreign affairs, or Jewish political activity in the Diaspora. “Jewish anti Zionists who criticise Israel for being racist, also operate in Jews-only racially-exclusive political cells. I realised then that we need a new ideological instrument that would attempt to explain it all. I guess that this is when I started to differentiate between Jews (the people), Judaism (the religion) and Jewishness (the ideology). In my work, I avoid the first two categories, I only deal with ideology -- the racially-driven supremacist and exclusive philosophy known as choseness. Zionism is just one face of Jewishness. Jewish anti-Zionism is clearly another face. John Zorn and his Jewish Radical Music is another, promoting a racially-driven pseudo-cultural ethos.”

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This, of course, is cultural dynamite as it cuts the racial rug from under the entire Jewish-homeland edifice, and means Atzmon is demonised by Jews both left and right.

Interestingly, Atzmon defends the original Zionist project. "Zionism was initially an interesting insight. It was a rare moment of Jewish self-reflection. Some Jewish intellectuals thought that they may have managed to grasp the root cause of the 'Jewish abnormal condition'. They believed that once in their homeland, Jews would become people like all other people.

"It is clear that they were wrong. The anti-Zionists argue that Zionism failed to fulfill its promise because the homeland narrative was a myth. Zion was actually Palestine and 'the bride wasn't free'. I try to take the discourse one step further. I argue that the desire to become 'people like other people' is in itself nothing less than an inauthentic destructive aspiration. It is doomed to fail because no people wish to become other peoples.

"In short, Zionism was and is a form of self-imposed detachment. But what about other forms of Jewish political identities? Are they any different? Not really, Jewish socialists or the Bund fall into the exact same trap. Instead of just joining humanity as equal amongst equals, they, for some reason, insist on exercising universalism in a tribal racially-exclusive setting. They are deceiving themselves for they 'speak universal' but in practice 'think tribal'. It has transformed the Holy Land into a Jewish bunker."

UN Special Rapporteur for Occupied Palestinian Territories Richard Falk calls *The Wandering Who?* a kind of diary of Atzmon's journey from hardcore Israeli nationalist to a de-Zionised patriot of humanity and passionate advocate of justice for the Palestinian people. The metaphor of a journey, which pervades the Diaspora Jewish experience, is apt -- it even seeps into the title.

I asked Gilad, as a jazz artist, to improvise on his less than orthodox approach to intellectual life. "I indeed define myself as a jazz musician. Jazz is, for me, a relentless and continuous attempt to reinvent oneself. In my writing I try to dig as deep as I can, I want to make sure that there is not a single unturned stone in my path. In the last decade people have been urging me to publish a book, but I wasn't ready to let my ideas settle. But at a certain stage I started to see a continuum between my activity as a musician and a thinker.

"I realised that I possess some capacity to shape the discourse -- to shake it by means of aesthetics. I basically learned to love myself hating myself. And once I became subject to Jewish progressive vengeance, the penny had dropped -- I realised that there was a clear continuum between Zionism and the so called Jewish 'anti' Zionism. The Jewish secular political discourse is largely a supremacist exclusivist discourse. The image of pluralism and internal debate are mere spin."

In *The Wandering Who?* Atzmon writes: "My emerging devotion to jazz had overwhelmed my Jewish nationalist tendencies; it was probably then and there that I left Chosen-ness behind to become an ordinary human being." I suggested that in realising his superior musical talent, he unconsciously discarded his faux sense of racial superiority, that he was indeed "Chosen" but, to paraphrase Woody Allen, not because he was a Jew. It is the wannabe Chosen who fall back

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on this racial crutch, which sadly makes it very, very hard for them to discard and realise they too can walk without the crutch.

True to form Gilad turned the tables on me. "To be honest, it was completely the other way around. When I started to play jazz, I was overwhelmed by others -- by Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, my new gods. I became an avid disciple of this black art form. They were the Chosen. When it comes to talent, I have never felt particularly talented as a musician. I may be more successful than some, but it is because I have always surrounded myself with people far more talented than myself. This is my biggest secret."

I asked him what his best-case scenario for "solving the Jewish problem" was, if he agreed with Iranian President Ahmedinejad in his speech to the "World Without Zionism" conference in 2005 that "this regime occupying Jerusalem must vanish from the page of time"?

"Absolutely!" he enthused. "I am pretty certain that there is no collective solution to the Jewish Question. For Jewish assimilation to be a success Jews must integrate into humanity for real. Universalism (as oppose to tribalism) is the only valid option for the morally troubled Jew. This would mean leaving chosenness and supremacy behind. However, as soon as this happens, the Jewish subject stops being affiliated with the tribe. Needless to say, many Jews have succeeded in doing so.

"It is also important to mention that Jewish Orthodoxy has always been impervious to the dilemma posed by the Jewish Question. Orthodox Jews have a lucid and coherent understanding of their Jewish identity. We have to remember that the only Jewish collective that supports Palestinians are the Torah Jews. Unlike the Marxist Jews and the so called progressive Jews, the Torah Jews do not try to steer the Palestinian solidarity movement; they are actually humble and sincere. Also, we have to remember that in spite of disturbing ideas explored in the Talmud, it is actually a Jewish secular movement that matured into a genocidal collective (Zionism/ Israel)."

Gilad tries to remain optimistic about the future of the Middle East, against "all odds", he warns. "But I am certain that political discourse is not going to bring a change. I am afraid to say it, but I think Israel is in a bad way and its supportive crowd isn't much better."

I asked him what he meant in his new book by: "Within the context of Jewish identity politics and ideology, history doesn't play a guiding role". "Zionists and Jewish 'anti' Zionists alike insist that circumstances made the Jews into what they are. I do not buy it. The emancipation of European Jewry started two hundred years ago with the French Revolution. And as we can see the Jewish conditions didn't change much. Also, Israel, which was supposed to be an exemplary case of Jewish proletarian rebirth, is in fact a hard-capitalist hell."

Atzmon points to another specifically Jewish flaw through the 19th century, that "the assimilated Jews failed to replace divinity with an alternative anthropocentric ethical and metaphysical realisation." So, what about the Homo Zionicus, I asked.

"Very good point. The only Jewish secular attempt to self-reflect and bring about an ethical Jew

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was the invention of the Homo Zionicus. But as we know, this project failed completely. The Homo Zionicus quickly became a mass murderer, detached from any recognised form of ethical thinking and engaged in a colossal crime against humanity. And yet, as I mention before, early Zionism was a unique self-reflective moment in Jewish history. Though the diagnosis of the Jewish abnormal condition was largely correct, tragically, the remedy was a disaster.”

Underlying this disaster, Atzmon writes, is the dilemma that the duality of tribalism and universalism “has never been properly resolved. Instead of redeeming the Jews it imposes a certain level of dishonesty.”

He told me, “The difference between the Jewish tribal ideology and other tribal concepts is that Jewish tribalism is an exilic concept. Judaism as we know it was formed in the Babylonian exile. Jewish tribalism became a template of negations. It is there to alienate the Jew from his surrounding reality. Jewish tribalism is imbued with hostility toward others and otherness. Jewishness can be celebrated without God or the Torah, but one thing is clear, the exilic conditions always remain intact. Most importantly, the Jewish Question cannot be resolved as long as Jews fail to overcome the exilic mindset. The exilic mindset aspires to Zion. It is detached from its surroundings while in the Diaspora, and once in Zion, the exilic identity collapses completely since its *raison d’etre* vanishes. In other words, Jews are locked in a limbo; their identity complex cannot be resolved.”

Atzmon develops his point about the ahistorical Jewish mindset in a fascinating way, writing: “Jewish national politics is an attempt to place the people of Israel beyond historical temporality. Israel is blinded to the consequences of its actions, it only thinks of its actions in terms of short-term pragmatism. Instead of temporality, Israel thinks in terms of an extended present.”

I countered that is precisely what critics of capitalism complain about -- that the system encourages capitalists to focus only on short-term gains, somehow imagining that the system can survive forever. Is there a Jewish essence to capitalism, I asked.

“As we all know, already in 1843 in “On The Jewish Question” Marx suggested that there is a linear continuum between Judaism and capitalism. I would re-phrase it as a continuum between Jewish ideology (Jewishness) and capitalism.”

He is no conspiracist. “I do not believe in Jewish conspiracies: everything is done in the open. Zionism is so successful because it is a global project with no head and a lot of hands. Many Jews and Israelis are doing many things that can be realised as complicity with Jewish power, yet they are not exactly aware of themselves following any orders or role. I will give you a simple example. Even the work of leading self-haters including myself for the matter, can be realised as evidence of Jewish pluralism and or Jewish openness. I can assure you that I don’t follow any orders. But when I realised it, I immediately decided to drift away, as far away as I could, and redefined myself as an ex-Jew. Sooner or later, we will have to admit that we are dealing with a very sophisticated identity. And it is sophisticated for a reason. Jews have been perfecting their exilic model for two millennia. It will take a while before other migrant communities catch up.”

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Gilad continued his epistemological riff with the elegant: "History, and historical thinking, are the capacity to rethink the past and the future." He then boldly suggests we "ask what it is that brought so much hatred on the people of Israel". A suggestion, of course, that is immediately rebutted with cries of 'blame the victim!'

"I certainly do not blame the victims," he insists. "But I insist that those who identify with the Jewish victims of WWII should ask some elementary and fundamental questions. I, for instance, find it very disturbing that they are also engaged in the total abuse of the Palestinian people." Thus, it is "inevitable" that "Israeli behaviour can throw light on the events that led to the Holocaust or other instances of persecution of Jews. It is not a political or ideological issue but rather a basic human tendency to do with temporality. People revisit their past in the light of their present realisations, and let's face it, Israel and its lobbies have accumulated a very negative reputation in the last decade."

This rethinking of history applies equally to the Palestinians. In a conference "Palestine, Israel, Germany -- The Boundaries of Open Discussion" in Freiburg Germany on 11 September, Atzmon began his talk by confessing that "though I was born in Israel, in the first thirty years of my life I did not know much about the Nakba, the brutal and racially driven ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population in 1948 by the newly born Israeli State, that in all my years in Israel, I have never heard the word Nakba spoken."

He went on to ask his German audience, "This may sound pathetic, or even absurd to you -- but what about you? Shouldn't you also ask yourself -- when was the first time you heard the word Nakba?" And he answers in his inimitable philosophical vein, "To be in the world means to be subject to changes and transformations. It entails grasping and reassessing the past through different present realisations. History is shaped and re-shaped as we proceed in time. Accordingly, we seem to understand the Palestinian expulsion and plight through our current understanding of Israeli brutality:"

This, it suddenly struck me, explains the rapid change in world opinion in the past decade: Israel's own genocidal crimes -- Atzmon calls the Nakba Israel's "original sin" -- have backfired, bringing the world to the side of the Palestinians, just as Hitler's genocidal crimes against Jews brought them the world's sympathy 60 years ago.

"The past is far from being a precisely sealed off set of events with a fixed meaning, pre-decided for us by a fixed viewpoint and then closed off from further debate. As much as our current reality is shaped by our world vision -- our past too, is shaped, re-shaped, viewed and re-viewed by the narratives we happen to follow at any given time. This is the true meaning of 'being in time'; this is the essence of temporality, and this is what historical thinking is all about. People possess the capacity to 'think historically' -- to be transformed by the past -- but also to allow the past to be constantly shaped, and re-shaped, as they proceed towards the unknown."

Just as the world is waking up to the reality of the Nakba, so many are questioning the Holocaust narrative too, which was constructed largely after the 1967 war to justify Israel's own crimes. "Both the Holocaust and World War II should be treated as historical events rather than as religious myth. But then, even if we accept the Holocaust as the new Anglo-American

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liberal-democratic religion, we must allow people to be atheists.”

Israel's treatment of Palestinians is now widely compared to Nazi Germany's treatment of Jews. Gilad does not pussyfoot in explaining this: “Stupidly we interpreted the Nazi defeat as a vindication of the Jewish ideology and the Jewish people; however, Jewish ideology and Nazi ideology were very similar. In some respects Israel is far worse than Nazi Germany. Israel, for instance, regards itself as a democracy, and as such, its brutal policies are accurately reflecting the will of the people. The latest polls show that the majority of Israeli Jews support ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians. 94 per cent of Israelis supported the carpet bombardment of Gaza at the time of Operation Cast Lead.

“We are dealing with a severe level of complicity here. It may as well be that some people out there are anti-Jewish. But we must ask what it is they oppose. Is it really the Jews as a people, a race, an ethnicity? I don't think so. In my lifetime, I have never come across anyone who hated Jews for being Jews. Opposition to Jews is a direct outcome of Jewish politics, whether it is Israel, Zionism, lobbying or even hard lobbying within the Palestinian solidarity movement.”

Atzmon criticises those anti-Zionists who blithely compare Israel to apartheid South Africa or other colonial regimes. “Zionism, colonialism, and apartheid are there to mislead. Israel is the product of Zionism but it isn't driven by Zionism. Israel is not a colonial state either. It may be a settler state but it lacks a mother state. And Israel is not exactly apartheid, though it has many apartheid symptoms. Apartheid is a system of exploitation of the indigenous people. Israelis prefer to see the indigenous gone. The above terminology is there to maintain dogmatic Marxism relevance within the discourse. But the contemporary left discourse has basically lost any relevance within our intellectual discourse. It needs an immediate facelift.”

In his conclusion to *The Wandering Who?* Gilad sadly point out that “for America, Britain and the West to rescue themselves all they have to do is to revert to Western values of ethics and openness. They must drift away from Jerusalem and reinstate the spirit of Athens.” That prompted me to suggest to him that it seems we have been living through the Jewish era in history and haven't even noticed it. He reminded me of Yuri Slezkine and his insightful (and boastful) *Jewish Century*.

Which prompted me to ask how those of us committed to social justice can make a strategy that outlasts our own feeble attempts? I told him I had hopes that Homo Sovieticus could survive long enough to provide a credible alternative to Homo Greedipuss but that hope collapsed, much like the attempt to make a Homo Zionicus.

“You have to ask yourself whether there was any suspicious similarity between the two utopian models and why,” he counselled. “The first generation has its ideals, but they don't transmit for the most part to the next generation. Such utopian ideas are structurally religious. This fact alone may explain the rise of dogmatism and stagnation.”

So, we can say the same goes for Homo Greedipuss, replacing “exilic” with “anti-bourgeois”, I offered. Said Gilad in conclusion, “We are dealing again with questions to do with the human condition. At this point we must revert to philosophical and metaphysical thinking. I believe that

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this is the remedy for the current crisis in humanist thinking. We must reinstate the ability to think, re-think, view and re-view. We must restore the ability to ask for the sake of questioning (instead of answering for the sake of silencing).”

Captions:

1/ Atzmon at London mass demonstration at the time of Operation Cast Lead in 2009 (Photo: Tali Atzmon)

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/taliatzmon/sets/72157622266562840/>

2/ bookcover The Wandering Who? A study of Jewish identity politics, Gilad Atzmon, Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011