

George Lichtheim

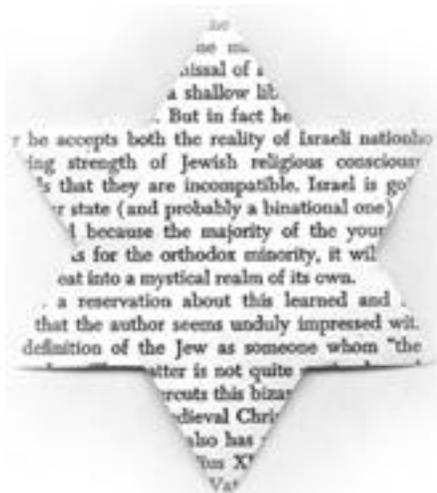
## A French View of Israel

by  
George Lichtheim

---

The publication in France in 1966 of Georges Friedmann's *The End of the Jewish People?*, almost coinciding as it did both with a special issue of *Les Temps Modernes* on the Arab-Israeli conflict and with the latest round in that seemingly unending struggle for possession of the Promised Land, seems to have had a calming effect on at least some of the Parisian literary bystanders. The reason is easily-discoverable from the preface to the very welcome English translation (by Eric Mosbacher) which has now made its appearance.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Friedmann, a distinguished French sociologist, is also a veteran of the wartime Resistance movement, into which (as he candidly explains) he was precipitated by the anti-Jewish decrees issued in October 1940 by the



Vichy regime: a regime, by the way, which enjoyed the enthusiastic support of almost the entire French Catholic hierarchy (though not of the lower clergy, many of whom joined the Resistance and did all they could to help Jewish victims of persecution). Himself an intellectual of the Left, Professor Friedmann recovered his shaken humanist faith in the company of the men and women whom he encountered in the underground movement. Nonetheless he had suffered a shock, though, as he puts it, "the

French resistance demonstrated the soundness of my motto *civic gallicus sum*." It was thus in a mood of critical expectancy, not unmixed with hope, that he visited Israel in 1963 and 1964, to see what its citizens had made of their unique opportunity.

The result is a book that is unlikely to satisfy anyone save the minority of non-combatants who share the author's own sympathetic and discerning assessments of Israel and its inhabitants. Coming at the present time, it is liable to be read primarily for chatting about the light it throws on the Arab-Israeli imbroglio; but these pages, through no fault of the author's, are precisely those that have been rendered out of date. It is no longer relevant to argue the pros and cons of Israel taking back the Arab refugees who, for one reason or another, fled in 1948. Most of them are now located in territory administered by the Israeli authorities, and the real issue is whether Israel can become what some of its founders, and most left-wing socialists, intended it to be: a binational state rather than a purely Jewish one. It is a tribute to the author's perspicacity that, writing in 1965-66, he deals with his thorny subject. Indeed, he has very definite views about it: views which will not make him popular either with Arab nationalists who still dream of destroying the state, or with the bulk of Zionist opinion.

BROADLY SPEAKING, HE FAVORS A SOLUTION THAT WILL ENABLE Israel to integrate itself into the Middle East and by the same token cease to emphasize the Jewish connection. This, of course, is heresy to the older generation brought up on the Zionist myth of "ingathering," or on some variant of the religious faith. It may, however, for reasons which he sets out at some length, shortly become acceptable to the young. For the fundamental fact about Israel—a fact rarely stated with the candor Professor Friedmann brings to the topic—is the radical incompatibility of its daily life with the aspirations of the Zionist movement from which it was born. Like communism in Russia, Zionism in Israel has become a hollow shell, the ideological remnant of a buried East European past. The author puts it with commendable clarity:

There is no Jewish nation. There is an Israeli nation. The state that came into existence as a result of Herzl's prophecies is not a "Jewish state." The Israeli state is creating an imperious national community that is conscious of itself, but does not include in that consciousness belonging to a "Jewish people." There seems to be a widening gap (among the, extremist zealots it is an impassable abyss) between that part of the population that sees itself as essentially Israeli and that

other part, consisting of the orthodox, that regards itself as essentially Jewish.

He has a good deal to say on the subject of the “Jewish personality,” both in its historical aspect and in relation to contemporary western culture, which will displease the more ardent Zionists, and yet he does not dispute that there was once an entity (albeit not a biological one) which could be described as “the Jewish people.” He merely happens to believe that it is about to vanish from the stage of history, and that the establishment of Israel, so far from perpetuating it and ensuring its survival, will speed its disappearance. As he puts it, in a challenging statement the truth of which must be apparent to every observer who keeps his eyes and ears open when visiting that fascinating country: “In the land of Palestine, in a sum-total of geographic, climatic, social, cultural, political conditions profoundly different from those that formed it, the Jewish personality is disintegrating. The ‘Jewish people’ is disappearing and giving place to the Israeli nation.”

This being the last thing in the world that the old generation of Zionists wants to hear, one may expect their criticism to take the form of an airy dismissal of Professor Friedmann’s work on the grounds that he is a shallow liberal with no sense of religious or national values. But in fact he is invulnerable on this score, for he accepts both the reality of Israeli nationhood and the enduring strength of Jewish religious consciousness. He merely holds that they are incompatible. Israel is going to become a secular state (and probably a binational one) as a matter of survival and because the majority of the young are bored with religion. As for the orthodox minority, it will increasingly, he thinks, retreat into a mystical realm of its own.

If I have a reservation about this learned and stimulating book, it is that the author seems unduly impressed with Sartre’s perverse definition of the Jew as someone whom “the Others” regard as a Jew. The matter is not quite so simple; and anyhow Professor Friedmann undercuts this bizarre notion by dwelling at length on the record of medieval Christianity in fashioning “the Jew” in its own image. He also has some polite but implacable remarks on “the silences of Pius XII”: remarks which will, one hopes, give acute pain to the Vatican’s apologists. Altogether a splendid book, readable, authoritative, and totally un beholden to any organized body of opinion.

## Notes

*George Lichtheim*

1. London and New York, 1967.