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History professor Yehuda Bauer: 'Netanyahu doesn't know history'

Even though the PM is the son of a historian, reads a great deal and is extraordinarily intelligent, he is not a gifted strategist, says Bauer in major interview.

By Dalia Karpel | Feb.21, 2013 | 12:55 PM | 12

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Yehuda Bauer. Photo by Yanai Yechiel

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He will turn 87 in April and his spine is no longer as straight as it once was, but Prof. Yehuda Bauer exudes vitality. He is blessed with a sense of humor that shelters him from the ravages of time. We are barely into the conversation and it is already clear that the memory of this world-renowned historian, who has written hundreds of articles and dozens of books, is extremely weak when it comes to events in his private life – such as when the love of his life renewed the ties between them.

“At some point in the 1980s,” Bauer mumbles with a smile. “If you want to know when the Turks conquered Constantinople, that’s no problem – I will tell you immediately. But when it comes to when I did something, and where, I am very weak.”

He is extraordinarily busy. He is at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, several days a week. He lectures there on his fields of expertise: the Holocaust and genocide. Last month, he spoke on these topics in London and The Netherlands, and he is planning to visit Tanzania as part of his remit within an international group, the Genocide Prevention Advisory Network, in which 17 academics from different countries are involved.

Bauer is the only Israeli in the NGO, of which he was one of the founders. The group meets once a month to develop means for the prevention of genocide. In

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Leading Palestinian intellectual: U.S. was never a fair broker of Israeli-Palestinian peace

I am just as pessimistic as Rashid Khalidi about the prospects for peace. But I had a hard time reading his new book, since it showed, once again, how catastrophic the settlement policy has been not only for Palestinians, but also for Israel.

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recent years Bauer, who is disturbed by “the horrific attitude in Israel toward Africans who flee here,”

served as honorary chairman of the local Committee for Darfur Refugees. His name often appears on political petitions. In May 2011, he joined others in signing a “declaration of independence from the occupation,” which called for the establishment of a Palestinian state. Asked where he gets the energy for all this activity, he guffaws and says, “Old age is not a sickness. It’s natural. I have no desire for it to end, but it’s not such a great catastrophe.”

Bauer lost his wife, Ilana, in August 2011. His new book, “The Impossible People,” which he is presently translating into English, is dedicated to her with the words, “Wife, musician, friend, partner, lover, who agreed with the content and did not manage to give her blessing to the finished product.”

It’s thanks to her the book was written, Bauer says. “Ilana attended my lectures, including lectures abroad. She knew where I stood, knew what I thought about our situation in Israel, read every article I published and kept on asking, ‘Why don’t you write it?’ So it was that I wrote this book of essays, between 2009 and 2012.”

We meet in the lobby of the protected-housing institution in which he lives, in Jerusalem’s leafy Beit Hakerem neighborhood. Before her death, Ilana saw to it that two of their children would handle his move to the spacious apartment. He knew nothing about it. “Ilana and I planned to move here at a later stage of our lives. After she died, it was clear that I would not be able to remain in our apartment in Givat Ze’ev [a post-1967 neighborhood in northern Jerusalem]. She knew that.”

How do you get along without the presence of your beloved partner?

“She talks to me all the time. I know it’s a hallucination, but that is exactly how we lived. I don’t have to consider what she would have said. She is part of me. As I said, she attended my lectures and had a feedback scale, ranging from ‘It was terrific’ to ‘What went wrong?’

We never quarreled and never exchanged a harsh word. On two occasions we tried to quarrel artificially, but after a few seconds we burst into laughter. Most of our life together was characterized by smiles and laughs, and we did not forgo ironic comments at each other’s expense. You know, I focus on the most terrible subjects a historian can deal with – the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, genocide – and when I think about my life with Ilana, it was the polar opposite that balanced everything.”

Yehuda and Ilana met in 1958, when he was 32, but decades passed before they were to realize their love – they didn’t start living together until 1993. That first encounter took place in Kibbutz Shoval, in the regional choir of kibbutzim belonging to the left-wing Hashomer Hatzair movement. He was a member of the kibbutz (in the Negev), in his third year of marriage and the father of a little girl. Ilana was born in Kibbutz Merhavia, in the Jezreel Valley. She was nine years his junior and living at the time in Kibbutz Dvir, not far from Shoval. For both of them, it was love at first sight.

“It was clear that I would not break up a home and family, so each of us went our own way,” he recalls. “In the mid-1980s she saw me on television and called. By then she had three sons and I had two daughters, and we felt that we could not wait any longer. But one of my daughters suddenly fell ill with multiple sclerosis, and again the connection between us did not work out. We used to meet once a year in a Netanya cafe and talk for a few hours. Four years later it turned out that the diagnosis had been wrong, and my daughter recovered. With the encouragement of my daughters and Ilana’s sons, we united. I was over 60.”

Photos of Ilana stand on a dresser in his apartment. He wears the ring his wife loved on his index finger, next to his wedding ring. “She was the most beautiful woman I ever met. Both outwardly and inwardly,” he says. “It wasn’t just a good life – it was perfect. Her sons called me dad. One of them, who lives in Australia, followed in my footsteps and is completing a



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doctoral dissertation on genocide. Another son, a Buddhist monk whose occupation is computers, lives in Jerusalem, and the third son, who is also a Buddhist, is developing a start-up in New York. Our great achievement is that our five children are bound to one another as though they were biological siblings.”

Second Masada

Bauer has been occupied with the history of the Holocaust for 50 years, and with the study of anti-Semitism for 30 years. For the past 15 years he has immersed himself in the subject of genocide and the possibilities of its prevention. A professor emeritus at the Hebrew University's Institute of Contemporary Jewry and an eminent scholar of the Holocaust, Bauer has been a member of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities since 2000.

In 1998 he was awarded the Israel Prize for his achievements in studying the history of the Jewish people. He was one of the editors of the “Encyclopedia of the Holocaust” and has been a consultant on many projects, including Claude Lanzmann's monumental film “Shoah” (1985) and Joshua Sobol's acclaimed play “Ghetto” (1984)). He is currently an academic adviser and member of the Yad Vashem council.

“The Impossible People” (the actual Hebrew word is “mehutzaf,” which in normal usage means “insolent” or “impertinent,” but is translated as “impossible” on the copyright page of the Hebrew edition) does not follow the rules of academic writing. There are no footnotes, and Bauer makes his arguments without quoting authorities or opponents. He explains that there was no point in writing a scholarly work, which would have involved three times the effort. “I wanted to express established subjective ideas, but I have no desire to argue. This book is part of me.”

Why do you call Jews the “impossible people”?

“The Jews were always in opposition to the whole world. The Jewish people would be endangered by unity. The quarrels and disputes are the engine that drives its culture forward, backward or sideways. That is its elixir of life.”

What do you mean?

“Internece strife is a trait of the Jewish people. Jewish culture is based on these internal conflicts. It starts with the struggle between the Hasidim and their opponents; between the true prophets and the false prophets; in the splitting of the United Kingdom into two rival kingdoms that fought each other; in the disputes between Sadducees and Pharisees; between Hellenizers and Hasmonians; between the religious establishment and the various zealots before the Great Revolt [against the Roman Empire], and so on. If we are deprived of the constant ability to quarrel, we will be finished.

The endless debates, from the Middle Ages to our own time, constitute the vitality of this people, so I call it chutzpah [a variation on the Hebrew title]. There is some inner cultural asset which is special and intriguing, and sometimes also repulsive and disgusting.”

To take a sentence from your book: “Where do we stand today?”

“We live in a country that is divided into four states, all of them within the boundaries of the Land of Israel. In a small country that lies between the Jordan and the sea is a state called Israel. Next to it, in Gaza, is the State of Hamastan. In the West Bank there is the State of the Palestinian Authority, which is under Israeli occupation, and within all of these is the State of Judea of the settlers, on whose behavior Israel exercises a certain influence.

“The dream of a Jewish democratic state will come to an end only if the right wing is in power. Consider Latvia or Estonia, which are nation-states with minorities that have equal rights. Non-French-speaking Basques live

in France, and a local dialect [Alsatian] is spoken in Alsace-Lorraine. That is the French nation-state, in which there are minorities that have equal rights not only formally but also concretely. Therefore, a Jewish democratic state is not necessarily a contradiction. It is a contradiction that depends on the political situation.”

What do you suggest?

“A democratic state within the 1967 boundaries, with certain territorial exchanges, will be a Zionist Jewish state that is obliged not only to make peace with its Palestinian and Arab neighbors, but offers the possibility for national-cultural development and full equal rights to the Arab minority living in the State of Israel. The settlement policy is working against us and endangering us. We have to remove the majority of the settlers from the territories, which are actually areas of the State of Palestine. Weren't a million people moved from Anatolia to Greece?”

“The only way to remove the settlers – and I write about this in the book – is by means of pressure that will be exerted on Israel by the major powers which have no interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. An agreement between the United States and the European Union and Russia, with China's involvement, could create a situation in which pressure will be applied to both sides in the conflict to engage in serious negotiations until white smoke emerges.

“Both sides are extremely susceptible to pressure. It would be enough if the EU were to discover that it has problems of financial liquidity and announce that it will have difficulty paying the salaries of the officials in the PA or in Gaza; or for the Pentagon to announce that it has a problem supplying spare parts to the Israel Air Force. If so, within eight months the Air Force's planes and equipment turn into junk. It makes no difference whether there are 30 or 40 settler outposts at this moment. The instant it is decided to stop financing the settlements, that story will come to a swift end.”

And if that doesn't happen?

“There is a danger that the Masada story will be repeated. A situation in which Israel will be isolated in the face of the world is liable to stir an extreme nationalist reaction and a posture of 'Let me die with the Philistines.' Our situation today recalls what happened in the Roman period, in the military revolt and confrontation against the 'United States' of that period. So, maybe we are not talking about a possible military clash with America, but about total isolation, sanctions and starvation, which could lead to extreme reactions deriving from pessimism and despair.”

Don't you think the two-state solution is fading and a binational state is coming into being here?

“The dream of a binational state and a state of all its citizens has no chance. That dream would mean a permanent civil war and mutual killing. Those who want to foment potential genocide here can do so by advocating a binational state for all its citizens. That, of course, would mean the end of Zionism in the sense of a state possessing a solid Jewish majority in which an Arab minority possessing equal rights lives.

“The original Zionist dream was erased by the settlements and a right-wing policy which is leading to a binational state. The Arab minority in Israel is entitled to national-cultural autonomy. There is no reason that Arabs should be compelled to sing 'With eyes looking toward Zion' [in the national anthem] and hoist the blue-and-white flag. As far as I am concerned, there is no problem with a Palestinian flag flying alongside the Israeli flag in every Arab community and Arab school in the Galilee, Jaffa and Tel Aviv.

“I am in favor of having joint textbooks for all the pupils in the country and, in addition, for autonomous books to be written for every community. The Israeli Palestinians should learn about the Palestinian Nakba just as we learn about the War of Independence, which was a just war – one

result of which was that a catastrophe befell the Palestinians. The civilian population usually flees during a war. That is natural and that was their catastrophe.”

At this point in the interview, I found myself arguing with Bauer about whether the Palestinian population fled or was expelled in the 1948 war. Bauer maintained that the civilians did not leave because of massacres or because of military actions to make them flee, and he insisted that there were no Israeli-initiated expulsions with the goal of perpetrating ethnic cleansing. Finally, he agreed that there was both one and the other. On the one hand, Zionism sought to be constructive, moral and conciliatory; whereas its other aspect was activist and destructive and represented an interest to “liberate” the country from its Arab residents.

God and Satan

Bauer, an avowed atheist, has written that he believes wholeheartedly that God has never existed. In the interview he adds, “One can talk about my God – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – who does not exist because, if he does exist, he is Satan and therefore is not God. The universe he supposedly wanted is oriented toward death. Everything, from galaxies to grasshoppers, is born to die.

“The murder of at least one million children under the age of 13 in the Holocaust – no matter what the reasons – makes God responsible for murder. Even if God turned his face away because he did not want to be a witness to the evil deeds of man, he is no less guilty than the Nazis if he knew and did not intervene. If anyone wants to believe in a God who is Satan – good luck to him. Genesis states, ‘And God created man in his own image,’ and the meaning was that man invented God.”

Bauer finds outrageous the contention by some rabbis that the Holocaust was due to the sins of the Jews. In his book he refers to “outlandish” rabbis who talked about the sins of those who perished, or about the iniquities of the forebears of the murdered. He mentions Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the spiritual leader of Shas, and kabbalist Rabbi Yitzhak Kedouri.

“I myself did not undergo that hell,” Bauer writes in his new book. His childhood as an only child was marvelous, he says, and he remembers his “wonderful” parents fondly. Yehuda Bauer was born in 1926, in Prague, where he completed primary school, emerging fluent in Czech, Slovak and German. His father, Victor, visited Palestine in 1934, to examine the possibilities of making a living there. A Zionist from his student days in Prague, Bauer Sr. had served as an officer in World War I before being captured by the Italians, and returned home sick. He married Ollie (Gusta) Fried, studied engineering and worked as an accountant in a coal company.

In his spare time, Bauer relates, his father was a composer, pianist, poet and writer of feuilletons. On the eve of World War II, his father – who was chairman of the Zionist Committee in Czechoslovakia – raised 1,000 pounds sterling in order to obtain immigration permits to Mandatory Palestine. On March 15, 1939, just hours before the German invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Bauer family left Prague by train, along with other immigrants to Palestine, among them Kafka’s biographer, Max Brod; German and Czech refugees; and German social democrats who were fearful of their fellow countrymen.

By the time they reached the border between Czechoslovakia and Poland, the Germans were already in control and started to scrutinize the faces of the passengers on the train. It was a moment of pure terror. Fortunately the station manager, who was apparently a Czech patriot, gave the signal and the train resumed its journey to Poland. From there the Bauers went on to Romania, where they boarded a ship that brought them to Haifa.

The family’s first home in Palestine was a rented apartment in the house of the Turkish Pasha, which was the first house in the Haifa neighborhood of Hadar Hacarmel. Bauer attended a well-regarded high school, which was established in 1933 by parents of German-speaking and Central European

Jews who wanted to ease their children's integration in the country. His parents brought with them a little money, but his father's attempt to go into business failed and he found work as a salaried official in a British firm.

Bauer's mother was the family's chief provider; already in Prague she had done well as a professional belt maker for dresses. When Yehuda left for school in the morning, his room became the seamstress' workshop. "My mother sold belts to fashion houses in Paris and provided for us well," he says. Bauer's high-school history teacher ignited his love of the subject – from the age of 16 he knew that history would be the hub of his life.

After being active in the scouts movement, Bauer joined the Palmach, the elite strike force of the prestate Haganah defense force. He was one of the founders of Kibbutz Hatzetim, west of Be'er Sheva. In October 1946, he received a scholarship from the British Mandate government for an undergraduate degree in Cardiff, Wales. He returned to Israel when the War of Independence broke out and fought in the Palmach's 9th Brigade. After the war, he returned to Cardiff to complete his degree. His high grade earned him an automatic master's degree as a prize.

In 1952, Bauer joined Kibbutz Shoval, which gave him permission to pursue his studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He was granted a doctoral degree in 1960 for his dissertation on the Yishuv – the pre-1948 Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine – during World War II. One chapter of the dissertation dealt with the effect of the Holocaust on the Jewish underground in Palestine. Bauer lived in Kibbutz Shoval for 41 years, establishing a family with his first wife, Shula. His daughters, Danit and Anat, grew up on the kibbutz.

As a historian, Bauer initially specialized in 16th-century English history, the history of the Far East and Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. He was afraid to touch the Holocaust. In the early 1960s, he recalls, he met the poet Abba Kovner, a Holocaust survivor, who had read Bauer's first book and wondered why he was not turning his attention to the Holocaust. Bauer replied that he was apprehensive, but Kovner reassured him: Fear, he said, was an excellent starting point. Bauer was persuaded.

For the purpose of his Holocaust research, Bauer learned how to read Polish, Yiddish and French, in addition to the five languages in which he was already fluent (Czech, Slovak, German, English and Hebrew). He started to lecture on the Holocaust at the Hebrew University in 1968. Over the years, he radically revised some of his views about certain controversial aspects of the subject in the wake of new information and under the influence of other scholars.

The rescue myth

In his new book, Bauer offers updated views on some of these issues. "The motive for the murder of the Jews was first and foremost ideological," Bauer says. In the book he illuminates the prewar background. Germany began to emerge from the deep economic crisis in 1932, thanks to a policy similar to that of the New Deal in the United States, and unemployment was eliminated by 1938.

According to Bauer, the German army did not want war. In September 1938, during the crisis over Czechoslovakia and the German demand to annex the Sudeten region, a group of officers – led by the chief of staff – planned a putsch against Hitler. They considered him a dangerous political gamble and they were concerned that Germany would be attacked in the wake of the crisis with Czechoslovakia.

Who, then, wanted war?

"Hitler. In the book I quote a memorandum that Hitler sent to Goering in August 1936. In it, Hitler writes, in inferior German, that if Germany does not crush Bolshevism, there is a danger that the German people will be destroyed. The goal of Bolshevism, Hitler wrote, is to foist international Jewry on the world by replacing all the political and social leaderships

with Jewish governments: Those striving for the Bolshevization of the world were the wealthy Jews – namely international capitalism, based in America.

“World War II broke out because the Nazi leadership believed in the doctrine of anti-Semitism, which accused the Jews of seeking world domination. In Europe alone, 35 million people perished in the war. In other words, 29 million non-Jews in Europe died mainly because of anti-Semitism, which is an extreme event. Another major element was Germany’s [perceived] need for territories in Ukraine and the Caucasus – a problem that, once again, could be solved only by going to war against the Jewish Bolshevism that ruled in the Soviet Union, which in Hitler’s eyes was on a par with the monied Western Jewry in America.”

Historical research has condemned President Roosevelt for abandoning the Jews, and some also accused the leaders of American Jewry for being silent during the Holocaust. Why do you think that the conventional view – that the world was silent – is mistaken?

“I had also thought so [originally], but changed my mind. The intra-Jewish debate about why the Jews of Europe were not rescued is pointless. The Allies could not have rescued them even if they had wanted to, as I prove in the fierce argument which, to this day, I have with researchers such as Rafael Medoff, from the United States, and his mentor, David Wyman, who claim the opposite. There was no way to rescue the millions. No one knew that Europe would be the venue for the planned, industrial genocide of Jews. No one could have known that there would be a Holocaust, because nothing like it had ever occurred before in the world.

“The Western governments could not have foreseen the events to come, and from 1935 until 1939 – amid the world economic crisis, with millions out of work in the United States and Britain – it was impossible to move millions of Jewish refugees out of Europe. The extermination in the death camps began in December 1941 and intensified only in 1942. The confirmation of the reports about the annihilation of the Jews arrived in November-December 1942. Even if there had been a willingness to bomb the death camps at that stage, the Allies did not possess bombers capable of flying those distances.

“From the middle of June 1944, there was no doubt about what was going on in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The order to bomb the extermination facilities from the air was not given, because of the policy of not using military means to destroy civilian targets. In any event, it was impossible to hit the four extermination facilities without endangering the lives of many Jews.

“Bombing the rail lines that led to the camp was also ruled out, because the Germans would have rebuilt them. And even if this had been done, the murder would not have stopped. Some of the victims were murdered at killing pits and many died as a result of the brutal death marches. The war went on for more than half a year after the Auschwitz crematoria were shut down on October 30, 1944, and Jews were murdered without end. There might have been possibilities of rescuing a few thousand Jews, but it was impossible to stop the annihilation of the millions before Germany’s defeat in the war.

“I maintain that the gas chambers should have been bombed not because it was possible to rescue Jews, but because this would have sent a moral message that someone cared about the masses of victims. It was a moral, not a practical, failure.”

Is it ignorance or manipulation when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in speeches to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, cites the opposition of the Roosevelt administration to bomb Auschwitz-Birkenau in order to hint at the Obama administration’s refusal to support Israel’s bombing of Iran?

“Netanyahu doesn’t know history, even though he is the son of a historian, reads a great deal and is extraordinarily intelligent. Netanyahu is an ideologue and a tactician, but not a gifted strategist. As an ideologue, he

believes wholeheartedly that we should rule the whole of the Land of Israel. If we had had a state in 1939 with half a million inhabitants, it might have been possible to mobilize two divisions and maybe someone would have donated money – I don't know from where – to create a bomber squadron. In 1942-1943, Germany had five million soldiers and about 6,000 military aircraft. We also have to remember that it was not possible to get Jews out of occupied Europe and bring them to Palestine.”

Despicable creatures

Bauer boycotts the official ceremony at Yad Vashem on the eve of Holocaust Martyrs and Heroes Day. He finds the juxtaposition of “heroes” and “martyrs” to be “foolish.” He writes in the new book: “I can no longer bear the speeches – void of content and packed with clichés – of presidents, prime ministers, rabbis and others ... What does it actually mean to say ‘Never again’ when genocides keep recurring? It’s just an empty slogan. And what is the meaning of ‘Never again’ when uttered by Jews, and especially by Israeli politicians? You don’t need a degree in psychology to understand that what underlies that utterance is a powerful desire to forget, and the phrase itself is a type of oath: We would very much like to forget, but regrettably we cannot.”

What is the right way to teach children and adolescents about the Holocaust?

“Contrary to my colleagues at Yad Vashem, I am against making the Holocaust part of the curriculum of the primary schools. When my grandchildren wanted to visit Yad Vashem, I told them that when they turn 16 I will take them for a 45-minute visit, and for a second visit a year later. It is traumatizing. I was against the trips to Poland [organized by high schools] unless the young people would be well prepared, the visit would include meetings with Polish youth, and the Israelis would not only visit the extermination sites but also places where Jews lived before the war.

“On one of my visits to Auschwitz, I saw Israeli high school students wrapping themselves in Israeli flags and singing songs. I wrote to the responsible official in the Education Ministry that one does not hoist flags and sing songs in a cemetery. It is the largest Jewish cemetery, and in cemeteries you wrap yourself in silence. My opinion was not accepted and the practice continues. We are a society in trauma, and therefore education entails inculcating the truth. The only way to deal with trauma is to teach the public the precise facts

“The Holocaust was not planned in advance. That is a fact. It developed in stages. There was definitely Jewish resistance, and it is important, because it is one of the things that sets apart the reaction of the Jews from the reactions of other peoples that were subjected to genocidal situations. There were good Judenrats [Jewish Councils in the ghettos] – especially the first ones – and there were negative Judenrats.”

One chapter of the book is entitled “Back to the present: On Jewish identity, secularism, Zionism and a place in the world.” In it, Bauer addresses the question of whether it is more accurate to speak of a Jewish people or a Jewish nation; what Jewish identity consists of and whether there is a connection between Jewish identities and Zionism; and the nature of the connection between religion and state.

He takes issue with the historian Shlomo Sand (author of “The Invention of the Jewish People” and “The Invention of the Land of Israel”). But his greatest wrath is reserved for the rabbis of the extreme right, the cultivators of the messianic thrust that resurfaced in Israel after the Six-Day War in 1967.

Bauer specifically talks about the book “Torat Hamelech,” by Rabbis Yitzhak Shapira and Yosef Elitzur, which discusses the question of how the halakha – Jewish religious law – relates to Jews who kill non-Jews in wartime or during periods of peace. Bauer read the book’s 230 pages carefully and also researched the ideological-religious foundation on

which this “verminous literary-halakhic” work – as he describes it in his book – is based. He added, “Many Jews behave according to the imperatives of these ‘rabbis,’ who are actually inciting to mass murder, meaning they are potentially responsible for genocide.”

He finds no basic difference between Shapira, Elitzur and “Torat Hamelech,” and Sayyid Qutb, the foremost figure of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s; Abdullah Azzam, leader of the global jihad movement; and Osama bin Laden. “They are despicable creatures,” Bauer says.

Why do you call them that?

“The book ‘Torat Hamelech’ calls for the murder of both non-Jews, meaning goyim, and of opponents of Israel, meaning Jews in Israel who have some sort of contact with goyim. As such, the Jewish extremists are fundamentally similar to Muslim anti-Semitism, which calls for the murder of Jews everywhere.

“The rabbis who wrote the book annul the commandment of ‘Thou shalt not murder’ by claiming it refers only to the murder of a Jew by another Jew – but that the murder of a non-Jew is permissible. They are effectively inviting the murder of others, such as the murder of infants of the enemy – the Palestinians – and of heretics of various types. From their point of view, it is permissible to murder all the Christians and Muslims.”

You write that “Torat Hamelech” is based, among others, on sources from the Bible, the Gemara, Maimonides, Shulhan Arukh (the Code of Jewish Law) and on books and rabbinical rulings written in recent generations. The primary source is Maimonides’ “Laws Concerning Kings.” Is it dangerous to rely on these sources?

“The quotations from these sources place the hilltop youth in the territories in a situation in which they endanger us all, and they are liable to spread and grow. I write explicitly in the book that there is a chance of genocide, although the more probable possibility of genocide is actually from the side of extreme Islam. In numberless sermons, preachers in mosques call for the Jews to be murdered wherever they are – and they have power. The Jewish group in the territories constitutes a small but extremely dangerous mirror image of extreme Islam.

“Extreme religion is utopian by its very essence, anticipating ‘redemption’ and the Last Days, and the coming of the messiah to fulfill the utopia – which, as I repeatedly write and say, is a murdering utopia. Every utopia murders. Beware of those who believe in the coming of the messiah.”

What do you say about those fans of the Beitar Jerusalem soccer club who believe in a “pure Beitar” and are against the signing of Muslim players. Isn’t that influenced by Nazi ideologies?

“There are no Nazi ideologies, there is one Nazi ideology. To be an extreme nationalist and hate Arabs, you don’t have to go only to Hitler. You can go to American history. In the original Constitution, a black slave was considered three-fifths of a human being. You can go to British or French imperialism, or to the year 1449 in Toledo, Spain, where a blood-purity law was declared that was aimed against Muslims and Jews. And you can definitely go to the Nazis. It is a universal sickness, not only a Nazi one, and it is definitely amenable to explanation.

“How to combat it? This old liberal says: education and the principles of the French Revolution. Not socialism, which on this subject failed almost as abjectly as capitalism. I distinguish between socialism and social democracy, which accepts the capitalist regime as a given but behaves within it according to enlightened principles. I spent a great deal of time in Sweden and Norway, and Ilana and I have an adopted daughter who is Norwegian, so I know something about it.”

When MK Yair Lapid rules out joining forces with the “Zuabis” – referring to Arab MK Hanin Zuabi in the plural – to block the formation

of a right-wing coalition, and when hardly any Zionist party sees the votes of the Arab citizens and their Knesset representatives as a possibility for cooperation, isn't this another aspect of their total exclusion? And you argue that one of the prior signs of the eradication of a people is its exclusion.

"I don't think it is right to say that no Zionist party treats the Palestinian population in Israel as equals. Meretz not only does this, it also has an Arab MK, as is proper for a fifth of Israel's population. The Zionist left always advocated this. It's true that Labor and its forerunner, Mapai, behaved differently, but, according to the testimony of the party's current leader, it is not left wing. Well, in my ageing eyes, Zionism is not Zionism when it does not treat the non-Jewish minority equally. But I, after all, am a dinosaur, so the question becomes superfluous from this point of view.

"Total exclusion does not necessarily lead to genocide, and it is only one of the possible elements for an outbreak of genocide. For example, the Jews were excluded in Nazi Germany, but because there was no historical necessity for the eruption of the war and, in its wake, the Holocaust, an anti-Semitic regime that excluded Jews could have developed without the genocidal stage. The Nazis did not know they would murder the Jews and until 1939 none of them talked about it – in contrast, for example, to extreme Islam, which speaks explicitly and relentlessly about the need to annihilate all the Jews. By the way, there is no need to minimize the danger of anti-Semitism just because Netanyahu uses it demagogically. British left-wing anti-Semitism is a fact and goes far beyond criticism of Israeli government policy."

Why do you say in the book that one of the traits of "the left-liberal type of anti-Semitism" is the fact that its thinkers include quite a few Jews and Israelis "who offer an ultra-Orthodox-style kosher certificate for ancient hatred of Jews," namely anti-Semitism?

"There is – and this is quite natural – a group which feels endangered, whether rightly so or not. There might be individuals – particularly intellectuals who want to be on the other side, and not with the endangered group – like the many examples of Jews who converted to Christianity and wanted to prove their new loyalty by means of anti-Jewish attacks. For example, Johannes Pfefferkorn, a Jew from Cologne, who during the period of the German Empire became a Dominican priest and authored thick volumes against the Jews.

"Today, anti-Semitism is spreading among people identified with the left, who are claiming that something innate in the Jews is contrary to human emotions. Those who attack Israel with flagrant hatred call for the annulment of the state's existence; in other words, to dismantle Israel from its status as a Jewish state and to create a Palestinian entity from the sea to the river. This will incorporate Israel and the areas of the PA and Gaza, purportedly as a progressive basis for equality between the two peoples while ignoring the identity and the national impulses only of the Jewish side. They would attack and destroy the entity called the State of Israel. That entails killing as many Jews as possible. In a word: genocide."

The occupation policy justifies a radical critique. Don't you think you are exaggerating about the plans for genocide against Israel?

"How can the Zionist entity be annulled without destruction? That is the implication of it. At the same time, I agree that the occupation policy in the territories of the PA is helping to bring about viewpoints of this kind. So are the actions of the hilltop youth and the fascist-religious-messianic settlers against their neighbors, while acts such as the burning of mosques, the cutting down of trees and attacks on Palestinians are not restrained by the government."

Does Israel have a chance for survival?

"The state has strong, good foundations which do not find sufficient concrete expression. When my grandson was about 16, he would disappear from the house for hours. Finally, his parents delicately asked where he

was going. He told them that he and four friends from high school were collecting food and clothes for a Holocaust survivor living in wretched conditions, and that they helped her out a few times a week.

“I told you earlier that I am active on the subject of the Darfur refugees, and I am not the only one. There are good people here, who are sensitive to the suffering of others. So, on the one hand I say that Israel faces a great danger, but on the other there is a chance for a turnabout. Historians are fantastic at prophesying the past; they are totally lost when it comes to foreseeing what the future will bring. But the future is never lost.

“I do not believe in revolutions, but there is a chance that the situation in Israel will change. That’s a possibility for which it’s worth living, and therefore I conclude the book with the Jewish people – of which I am a part, whether I want to be or not – and I too have a smidgen of Elitzur-Shapira within me. I am trying to get rid of it and suppress it. That is why I am ready to identify with this people.”

There is a type of obsession in your work as a historian. Isn't the need to read every new testimony and every book that is published a form of addiction?

“Possibly, though I would not use the word ‘addiction.’ Sometimes I wonder whether my research has done me harm. I have a strong libido – in this I am like my father, who was always very positive in the most difficult situations in life. Our children – mine and Ilana’s – taught me a little Buddhism, namely to live the moment without ignoring either the past or the future, and to take things factually and realistically.”

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