

Ilan Pappé: The historian as Apologist.

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Writing a review of a new book by Ilan Pappé is not an obvious thing to do. His books are not published in Hebrew and are not intended for Hebrew readers (they are published in Arabic, on the other hand). Their contributions to the understanding of history are negligible. So why review the book and why do so in Hebrew?

I am not surprised at all that historians abroad rely on Pappé, and in fact hardly know any other literature on the Jewish-Arab conflict. I am likewise unsurprised when I meet Palestinian scholars, whose arguments are based on Pappé's writing, and mainly on his tome "The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine," (Oneworld Publications, 2006). Pappé is a brand-name, who has made himself a reputation as a historian among certain audiences. More power to him for that – and I say this without a shred of cynicism. Therefore, two questions beg themselves: How is it that in contrast to his great popularity abroad (and among part of the Arab community in Israel) he does not publish in Hebrew, and how come historians in Israel barely accord his writing any utility in deciphering history?

To those who would claim that Pappé is more critical and sharp-eyed than other historians, one should point out that anyone who visited a library in recent years could easily behold quality literature, published in Israel, that is critical of Israel's policy and history. That is to say, Pappé did not invent this critical approach (nor does he claim to have done so, although he claims that the academic establishment has targeted him for his positions). And yet, he is absent from the field of historical study in Israel.

Pappé's new book, "Ten Myths About Israel", holds 166 pages (including footnotes) and is divided into ten chapters which, to believe the author, refute and debunk common myths about Israel. Pappé declares in his foreword that the book is based on meticulous perusal of the historical material and the most current historical research. At best, this is an error (which he repeats

numerous times throughout the book), for the critical reader will notice at once that the book contains hardly any archival documentation. One may say that this is no big deal, for this is not a study of a single episode, but a general review of long-term history. However, another prominent feature of the book is the fact that it ignores the historical research of recent years. When Pappé does reference to the "latest research", he bases his conclusions on Palestinian researchers. In addition, it is evident how fond Pappé is of referencing his other works; and indeed, the man is virtually a literary production plant.

Prisoners to the Logic of Grievance

"This is not a balanced book", Pappé writes, and reading it confirms this assertion. But even if one views a lack of balance in the interpretation of facts as taking sides in the dispute, the author is not exempt from accuracy regarding the facts themselves. He may interpret the facts as he wishes, but stating them requires honesty – however uncomfortable to the author they may be. Pappé's book is laden with errors, failures, absurd interpretations and unreliability, to the point where it is difficult to decide where to start addressing them. There are two main forms of "logic" threaded through the book: The "logic of elimination" and the "logic of dehumanization". These, which the author claims have taken over the souls of Zionists and Israelis, are the ones guiding Jewish-Zionist politics from the very beginning.

To prove this, Pappé channel-surfs (I could find no better term) through the history of the past 150 years. For instance, to disprove the first myths, that "Palestine Was an Empty Land", he seriously relies upon a few words on the Israeli Foreign Ministry website. At this website, Pappé discovered following in-depth research, the history of the Palestinians who have lived in the country throughout the years is ignored. As we recall, Pappé states that his work is based on the most current research and archival digging. But he himself knowingly and maliciously ignores a prolific literary and research endeavor regarding the history of the local Arabs – an integral part of which was written by Jews and Israelis. Where's the myth to be debunked?

Pappé knows that the leaders of the Zionist movement were well aware of the existence of Arabs in the land, and some of them gave the matter much thought, albeit with different conclusions than Pappé would have liked. Since there were Arabs in the land, Pappé needs to debunk another myth, that “Zionism is Not Colonialism”. Here, too, he grabs what he can, sloppily putting together a “colonialist” theory and stating (as in most cases, with no reference to sources) that in effect, the leaders of Zionism told arriving Jews that the Arabs are no locals, they have no rights to the country and that the problem arising from their presence here can be solved (further on we shall discover that the solution is transfer and annihilation). Who exactly among Zionist leaders claimed such a thing – this Pappé doesn’t say, and of course he brings not a word from many Zionists who believed the complete opposite.

Pappé often repeats the phrase “official Israeli narrative”. I know of no official narrative (created by whom? The right? The left? The universities?) and I have certainly encountered no “official” narrative claiming that Palestinian opposition is motivated by hatred of Jews. Yitzhak Epstein, one of the first settlers in the Land of Israel, a member of “Hovevei Zion,” argued forcefully in his essay “A Hidden Question” (1907), which caused a great stir among the small Jewish population in the country, that the Palestinian reaction to Jewish immigration is rooted, among other causes, in economic competition and dispossession, not in hatred or antisemitism. The list of those who made similar arguments is a lengthy one.

Of Zionism and Messianic Christianity

To Pappé, Zionism is actually an incarnation of messianic ideologies with roots a hundred years before the first Zionist Congress, held in 1897. His discussion of messianic Christianity is one of the most elaborate in the book (and one of the most detached from reality). He needs it to debunk the myth that “The Jews Were a People Without a Land”. Antisemitism in Europe? Pogroms? These are inconsequential issues that matter to Pappé not at all.

In general, Pappé hardly addresses what happened in practice, but only declarations and ideas.

Had Pappé read the diary of Zionism's founder, he would have become acquainted with the amusement Theodore Herzl derived from the end-times calculations of his friend William Henty Hechler, a British missionary with influence among the German aristocracy. Herzl viewed him as a besotted mystic. A cursory reading of the literature produced at the time by most Jews would show Pappé how absurd the connection between Zionism and Messianism truly is.

Unlike Pappé, who knows little and less of the history of Messianism, one would be better served in seeking the opinion of one of the foremost experts on the subject, Gershom Scholem: "I have never hidden my view, that Zionism is not a messianic movement," Scholem wrote. "There is no greater error than that of those who believe that Zionism and Sabbateanism share common roots. This is stuff and nonsense. This is a trumped-up claim". Incidentally, I was most surprised to learn that according to Pappé, Zionism was a "notable political movement in Europe", during the first few migration waves. Unfortunately, it wasn't prominent enough to get the Jews out of Europe in time.

Pappé tried to debunk another myth: "Zionism is Judaism". But who posits that it is, anyway? According to Pappé, all of us. And it is clear that to him there is only one Judaism – and in this he is no different than Rabbinical orthodoxy. To debunk this myth he expends much effort in an attempt to show that the Bible was in fact the roadmap and main justification for Zionism – and mainly for socialist Zionism, which demanded an exclusive right to the land in the name of divine promise. But while when it comes to the Palestinian side he knows well how to distinguish between politics and ideology, when discussing the Jewish side he ignores this distinction, and any fleeting remark by a socialist, which mentions the phrases "Bible" or "Land of our fathers", instantly becomes proof positive to Pappé, exposing to the readers that the socialist pioneers were in fact members of a fundamentalist Jewish order.

Of the Bible as a source of inspiration to the builders of Israel, much has been written. However, it is evident that Pappé is at pains to ignore Zionism's rebellion against traditional Judaism (or perhaps, in keeping with his frequent shallowness, he simply does not know about it). As an example, Pappé speaks of Herzl, who he claims the Jewish claim to the land on the Bible. But it was actually Herzl who spoke of Israel's drawing power (as opposed to Argentina, where Baron Hirsch was attempting to settle Jews), as "a mighty legend". Pappé's trick is always the same: Rip a quote from its context and paste it to fit the author's worldview.

A Failing Attempt to Exonerate the Mufti

As one might expect, the book deals extensively with the partition plan and the War of Independence / The Nakba. Here and there Pappé is willing to give the Jews a break, and even writes that even if the Biblical mandate were valid, he cannot understand why it was not "possible to find a solution that was not restricted to the Biblical map" (!) Since Pappé is familiar with the UN partition plan – which Israel accepted and the Arab side rejected (rightly, in his opinion) – there is no choice but to expose Pappé's apologetic face. This face shows itself in all its glory in Pappé's references to Resolution 194 of the UN General Assembly, which repeats itself several times throughout the book.

As is well-known, this resolution was adopted as part of an international attempt to break through to an end to the conflict through the formation of a reconciliation commission which include the famous section 11, which addresses the status of the refugees and which is at the center of debate for many years. Pappé reminds his readers that the General Assembly adopted the resolution and true to his unbalanced writing, it is clear that he repeats it to expose the injustice that Israel has and still is causing to the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees.

However, he refrains from as much as hinting at the fact that the same Arab countries who had voted against the partition plan a few months prior also voted against this resolution. The reason for their opposition was that

accepting the resolution implicitly entailed recognizing Israel. Even Palestinians who followed the Mufti, Haj Amin al-Husseini, were opposed to it, as they viewed it as Palestinian surrender. In other words, Pappé fulminates against the fact that Israel doesn't accept his interpretation to section 11 – when the Arab states themselves reject it.

Indeed, Pappé is within his rights in claiming that the Mufti was “not an angel” and that he was pushed into collaboration with Nazi Germany due to the “circumstances”. But his claim that the Mufti's actions had no significant impact on Palestinian history is baseless. Not only has Pappé himself asserted otherwise in earlier books, but his attempt to exonerate the Mufti is done in a grotesque and artificial manner. Even “balance” can be done in good taste.

Pappé's treatment of bloody events of 1948-49 is horrifying. He discusses the war in the chapter attacking the myth that “the Palestinians Voluntarily Left Their Homeland in 1948”. First of all, even the most establishment-bound researchers, who claim that there was no expulsion during the war, do not claim that the Palestinians left “voluntarily”. Their claim is that the flight was spurred by some Arab leaders, who promised the local Arabs that they would soon return.

Secondly, Pappé deals with the issue of transfer (which according to him began long before the war) in a superficial manner. For instance, he offers quotes by Berl Katzenelson and tells us that while the man (who died in 1944) spoke of “voluntary transfer” (that is, population exchanges in accordance with the partition of the country) which was supposed to take place following the implementation of the partition, pursuant to the Peel commission. But, Pappé reveals to us, leaving his sources undisclosed, “this was not, however, an honest position, nor was it a possible one”. Actually, Pappé knows for a fact, it was a “trick” that obscured the Zionists' true goal: “Massive ethnic cleansing”. What is the proof of these claims? What sources are they based upon? On these points, Pappé is silent.

The following sentence illustrates just how baseless Pappé's interpretation is, and I really am at a loss as to where to start in refuting it: “I claimed that the war was initiated by Israel in order to secure the historical opportunity to

expel the Palestinians". Israel initiated the 1948 war? There is not a single source offered by Pappé that supports this conspiracy take, but it is reminiscent of claims that Hitler was actually a victim of a Zionist-Western conspiracy.

However, it seems that even Pappé finds it hard to coherently integrate such a bombastic claim into the historical analysis, for a mere few pages later he writes that the Zionists prepared themselves for the invasion by the Arab countries, and "this did happen, and we now know that the Jewish military benefited from the Arab forces lack of real preparation". So wait, who initiated the war, again? When Pappé refers to Plan D (March 1948) which was conceived early in the war, he replicates the antiquated claims, endlessly refuted, that the idea for the creation of a territorial continuity was in fact an expulsion plan. The fact that many historians have already debunked the "transfer thesis" that was allegedly part of Plan D, is not only not addressed by Pappé, it isn't even mentioned. While the issue of expulsion during the war should be debated (and sometimes Ben Gurion sided with this policy), but proof must be offered that it was intentional and preconceived, and not presume to solve the issue so pathetically. Pathos is not an argument.

The many errors strewn through Pappé's book arouse much doubt regarding his credibility as a historian. I do not mean typos and errors of inattentiveness. That happens to most of us, but to errors stemming (as he himself states) from an attempt to write an "unbalanced" book. Pappé has command of both English and Hebrew, but his translation skills leave his credibility in question. I'll offer but one example: In discussing the relations between the settlers and pioneers and the local Arabs, Pappé offers a quote by Yonah Horwitz, a member of the second migration wave, who worked in the colony of Hadera. Pappé writes that the settlers were surprised to find Arabs in the country and quotes Horwitz as saying that "I was disgusted to find out that in Hadera part of the houses were occupied by Arabs". Disgust is indeed a strong term, making this a difficult statement.

So I turned to the bookshelf, to check the "Book of the Second Aliyah" ("Sefer Ha'Aliyah HaShnia, 1947) and turned to the page cited by Pappé. Thus reads the Hebrew source: "The colony made a great impression

(“Roshem Az” רושם אז) upon me. Few houses within a thick forest, which reminded me of Russia... but some of the houses were occupied by Arabs who worked in the colony and their families.” The words “Roshem Az” used by Horwitz can be translated in several ways, none of which are remotely akin to “disgust”. How does one explain the falsehood? This is a case of seething hatred towards Zionism, which turns the historian into an apologist.

Pappé’s struggles to scrape arguments against Israel reach the most frightening heights of esoterism. For instance, as an aside to a discussion of Palestinian refugees, Pappé mentions (positively, of course) US President John F. Kennedy’s reluctance to provide Israel with arms. In what seems as a clue to his own position, Pappé claims that director Oliver Stone mentions an Israeli connection to the Kennedy’s assassination in his famous 1991 film “JFK”, which deals with the conspiracy theory surrounding that murder. That is to say: Israel assassinated Kennedy because of his hard stance towards it. But not only does Stone not so much as hint of such a connection in the film, but the most unhinged corners of the American right-wing – the ones who fervently discuss the nexus between aliens, the Kennedy assassination and the nuclear reactor in Dimona – attacked Stone’s film *precisely* because he does not address this angle! In fact, what these conspiracists claim is that Stone ignored the Israeli involvement in the President’s assassination because the film’s Jewish producer, Arnon Milchan, demanded that he exclude it. It turns out that not only does Pappé not read the historical research relevant to his field, he also does not watch the films he references.

The Facts Don’t Matter

Pappé debunks the myth that “Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East” through a sloppy discussion of the status of Palestinians in Israel, and mainly through a discussion of the martial law that was in effect in Israel until 1966. The martial law era is an indelible stain upon the history of Israel, but Pappé, as usual, forges the history. For instance, he deals with the Kafr Qassem massacre extensively. We learn that the 11 soldiers who committed

the atrocities in the village were put on trial only thanks to the efforts of Knesset Members Tawfik Toubi and Latif Douri. But not only was the decision to try these men made within days after the massacre, the two men's important actions notwithstanding, but Douri was never even a Knesset member. Furthermore, the punishment meted out to the soldiers was not just a "small fine" but sentences of years in prison (Shmuel Malinki, for instance, was sentenced to 17 years). True, by 1960 none of them was in prison, as they were pardoned, and this drew much criticism in Israel. The only one who was let off with a "small fine" was Brigade Commander Yisaschar Shadmi (who paid a fine of one Grush, or 1/100 of the then Israeli Lira, and "Shadmi's coin" became a byword among the Arab population to describe the regime's attitude towards them). But as we've seen, Pappé is not interested in the facts.

And if vetting the facts of history requires patient archival work, Pappé is no more diligent dealing with the present. He states that 70% of all industries in Israel are closed to Arabs due to security concerns, and he refers to a report by Adalah (The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel). This is a high and surprising datum. Needless to say, I found no such claim nor anything similar in said report. However, a report by the Trade, Industry and Employment Ministry (2012) states that 8% of private businesses and 17% of organizations in the public sector reported that they do not employ Arabs due to security concerns.

Pappé tries to debunk many other myths that space constraints preclude addressing. In his view, the Palestinians fell victim to Israeli politics during the Madrid-Oslo discussions (the book contains no criticism of Yasser Arafat. In his telling, it is the Israelis who executed many Palestinians following Oslo and not Arafat, who methodically eradicated those who opposed him), and the disengagement from the Gaza Strip was a trick meant to enable Israel to annex the West Bank and sow chaos. Pappé is free to state that Hamas is not a terror organizations but a legitimate freedom organization, and that Fatah is a mercenary of the West. And of course, he is free to claim that firing rockets at Israel is how the Palestinian "community expressed its will to life". All these are legitimate interpretations (unsupported by facts presented by Pappé, but still). However, the claim that the tunnels which Hamas built (and

which Israel bombed) in the period prior to operation Cast Lead in 2008 were meant for transferring food and for defensive purposes requires serious proof, which Pappé does not provide. It is possible that the IDF and the government fooled us all and took us for a ride, but such a claim must be well backed-up. Incidentally, Pappé's logic leads us to the conclusion that Hamas used one of these tunnels to abduct Gilad Shalit in order to use him as a snack.

The tenth myth Pappé exerts himself to debunk is that "The Two-State Solution is the Only Way Forward". Throughout the book he wonders if Israel even has a "peace camp". I see myself as part of this camp and this is why I find myself at odds with my Arab friends due to Pappé's poor writing. However, because I care about the lives of Arabs and Jews in this country, because the occupation is a festering ill, because I think the Arabs of this country are treated appallingly – for all these reasons and more I understand what Pappé does not seem to: That you can write in an unbalanced manner (as Pappé declares that he does), but forging the truth itself is inane.