



The Last Israeli Liberal: Remembering Israel Shahak (1933 - 2001)

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During half a century of existence, the State of Israel did not produce many great men and women, either in the fields of science and art or in the domain of ethics. The heroes of Israel are petty generals, narrow minded politicians, and morally-crippled writers. True intellectuals and moral figures can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Israel Shahak was definitely one of these very few, together with his long-time opponent, Yeshayahu Leibowitz.

Though Shahak affirmed that he was following the path of Baruch Spinoza, and adopted Spinoza's philosophy as a life guide, I think Shahak was above all one of the last

philosophers of the 18th century school of enlightenment, rationalism, and liberalism, in the American meaning of the concept. While rejecting Marxism, Shahak was deeply committed to social justice and to what he called a humanist socialism.

As a true liberal, he was deeply opposed to any kind of religious coercion against individual life and equally opposed to religious involvement in politics. In the sixties, Shahak's first political steps were in the Israeli League Against Religious Coercion. However, after the 1967 war, he disavowed this organization, because he believed that his colleagues were fake liberals: while using liberal principles to fight against religion, they were silent on the crimes of the Israeli occupation.

Shahak, on the other hand, was not only ready to speak out loudly against occupation, administrative detentions, house demolitions, and torture, but also ready to act on these issues. He did so with people and organizations that were very far from his own milieu, both socially and ideologically: the Israeli Communist Party and the young radicals from the anti-Zionist Matzpen group. In 1969, he thus placed himself in a very isolated position: Matzpen was public enemy number one; and Communists were identified with the Soviet dictatorship.

However, Shahak was not a man to be influenced by what people said or the public image of potential partners. Furthermore, he did not accept such behavior from others. When he established the Committee Against Administrative Detentions in 1970 and later became the vice-chairman of the Israeli League for Human Rights, Shahak placed

one condition: Communists Party members would work together with Matzpen activists, despite their differences and the reluctance of the Party to be identified with a group, that openly supported the Palestinian national resistance.

In the late sixties and the early seventies, I worked very closely with Shahak and used to come to his flat almost every day, to assist him documenting the crimes of the Israeli occupation and to plan protest activities. His flat was messy, dirty, and smelly, with half-empty cans of food and piles and piles of newspapers - in which he could find, in few seconds, any article he wanted. But all that was quickly forgotten when Shahak would begin to analyze the news, commenting on articles from the six to eight newspapers he read daily.

Israel did not speak only about politics. He could speak just as well of philosophy, history, religion, or music, with the same erudition and insightful knowledge. He was a great intellectual in the classical meaning of the term - not confined to one or two fields of expertise: a man of culture, and not only western culture.

I remember one day, when he asked me if I wanted to borrow some of his records. He had a very rich collection of classical music, often with extremely rare performances, especially in opera. I answered that I would be delighted to listen to some of his records, secretly worried by the dust and what seemed to be remains of marmalade that covered them. And then he asked me if I like Haydn. I answered, "Not so much, his music is too light for my taste." He laughed with his typical loud laugh, and replied: "You don't

know Haydn... the first symphonies ... not the well-known later ones. Take them, and afterwards we will talk again." We rarely spoke about Haydn, who became one of my favorite composers.

Shahak's knowledge ranged over many fields; and most of the time, he had clear-cut opinions, which were extremely difficult to challenge. For he was not a man of dialogue; and when he changed his views, it was - most of the time - through his own thoughts, and not under the influence of anyone. When he changed his mind, he rarely admitted it and continued to argue his new position as if it were the direct continuation of what he always had argued before. Shahak did not leave too much room for question marks or friendly divergences. On political issues, in particular, slight disagreements could easily degenerate into antagonism and, sooner or later, anger and painful separation. Throughout the years, most of his close political friends became enemies; and, stubborn as he was, Shahak was never ready to reconcile.

Consistent with his liberal values and democratic philosophy, Shahak quickly evolved from radical opposition to the occupation to an overall challenge to Zionism as a regime based on structural discrimination and racism. Nothing could stop his rational way of thinking, and no sentimental obstacles, or consensual taboos, could make him refrain from drawing the conclusions to which his rational thinking led.

In that sense too, Shahak was a man of the enlightenment for whom reason was the only valuable criterion of truth and the guide for personal conduct. When asked to moderate his positions, or at least the vocabulary he

was using, in order not to harm his academic career or to give more credibility to his arguments, he reacted with anger: "This is the truth, and nothing will oblige me to make it milder."

In order to draw true conclusions, there was a need for evidence. Shahak dedicated most of his time to collecting and translating articles from the Israeli mainstream media, which he used as documentary proof for his radical criticism of Zionism. For many years, the *Shahak Papers* were the only valuable resource to anyone abroad who was interested in challenging the Zionist discourse.

However, the *Shahak Papers* had one weakness: he felt the need to add long footnotes to the articles he translated. These footnotes were another expression of his tremendous erudition but often had a counterproductive effect on the reader. Instead of letting the text speak for itself, Shahak felt the need to add evidence aimed at proving how hypocritical an author was, or what a criminal a particular Israeli leader mentioned in the text might be. He was particularly virulent against writers or politicians claiming to be democrats, liberals, or leftists.

Shahak's footnotes were most of the time very logical, but not necessarily convincing, pointing to one of his main political weaknesses: as an extreme rationalist - he addressed human beings from the point of view of rationality and logic only. He failed to take into consideration all the irrationality that exists in human beings, especially in dealing with ideological issues, and the need to develop educational ways, to gradually change the misconceptions of others by speaking to their hearts and not only to their

minds.

Intellectual integrity was for Israel Shahak the ultimate criterion, no matter what the political and practical implications: in 1999, he voted for Netanyahu, because he deduced from a very rational analysis that Ehud Barak would be more harmful than Netanyahu to the cause of right and justice. Some of his friends tried to convince him that it was perhaps logical, but politically wrong, to vote for the head of the Israeli right and that it could have been more pedagogical to call for abstention. But, we knew that he would not be convinced.

In his last years, Shahak increasingly focused his public attacks - especially in letters to *Ha'aretz* and *Kol Hair* - against the Palestinian national movement and the radical left in Israel. In his eyes, the Israeli left was not critical enough of the Palestinian nationalists. For many of us, it was a severe political mistake and could only serve the enemies of peace and justice. However, for Shahak, the duty of an honest person was, first of all, to tell the truth and to unmask the hypocrites - no matter what the political implications and no matter what kind of impact it might have on changing the world and its people.

In that sense, Israel Shahak was not a political activist - but rather a kind of modern prophet, standing at the gates of the city to denounce evil, intellectual cowardice, and moral hypocrisy. As such, he will be sorely missed by all the friends of justice and human dignity.

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