

A useless nihilist seeks asylum



Gil Troy

An Israeli leftist who supports boycotting his own country has applied for asylum in Canada, claiming that because some Israeli officials denounce the boycott divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement, he needs refuge. “I said that I’m persecuted as a BDS activist due to the general threats by ministers [Gilad] Erdan and [Arye] Deri,” Gilad Paz told *Ha’aretz* from his new home in Montreal, where, I guess, no public disputes ever take place and no ministers ever denounce positions dissidents take. Paz has a hearing on Sept. 29.

If I were a satirist, I wouldn’t be brave enough to make up this absurdity – who would believe it? Beyond the fact that most serious human rights activists in Israel have never even heard of this guy, the Israeli left remains loud, proud and

free. Read the anger that *Ha’aretz* spews daily. Watch how many Israeli academics ingratiate themselves with Europeans by knocking their own country with outlandish criticisms. Beyond that, note that Israel’s political culture, while famously fragmentary and volatile, certainly compares to a burkini-banning France, to a Trumpificacious America and to a French-first Quebec. In fact, Paz’s case is less compelling than an Anglo Montrealer applying to the United States for asylum in flight from Quebec’s language police, and no American judge would take such idiocy seriously.

Alas, in our topsy-turvy world, filled with people anxious to believe the worst about Israel, many will respect Paz’s claims. To use words like “persecution,” and “asylum” and “refugee” in a conversation about the free-spirited debates of Israeli democracy demeans refugees who genuinely need asylum. Those of us lucky enough to live in democracies that pass what former Soviet Refusenik Natan Sharansky calls the public square test – can you denounce your leader publicly and avoid jail or worse – should never compare the occasional

discomfort we might feel when debating with the suffering dissidents experience in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, China and other dictatorships.

Beyond fuelling the irrational demonization of Israel, Paz’s cry reflects the one-way, crybaby politics of the left that is afflicting college campuses. The right has its own pathologies, but too many leftists bash wildly, then whimper anytime anyone pushes back. To use the ridiculous language of the modern spoiled student activist, too many on the left like Paz commit macro-aggressions such as singling out Israel for a boycott campaign, then whine about “micro-aggressions.” They will libel the Jewish state and the Jewish People, and some will encourage anti-Semitism, but they get offended and go legal if someone looks at them skeptically. Whatever happened to free-wheeling, vigorous debate? Why do so many radicals demonize Israel, the United States and conservatives, among other favourite targets, then seek asylum if anyone dares to disagree with them?

This nonsense goes way beyond “useful idiots,” the phrase wrongly attributed to

Vladimir Lenin. These people are useless nihilists. The only impact they have is negative. Calling for a boycott against Israel or asking for asylum when you are not being persecuted doesn’t hurt Israel, a stable democracy whose economy has only grown in the last few years. But wild charges and angry campaigns do hurt the cause of peace, undermining any hopes of building the trust necessary for compromise.

Inevitably, the people who are going to most bash Paz and his false asylum claims will come from the right – or be called conservative. Wouldn’t it be great to hear from some leftists embarrassed by this useless nihilist? Shouldn’t other Israelis who fight Israel’s policies in the West Bank denounce Paz, and the whole counterproductive BDS campaign? This fear of anyone breaking ranks in the Mideast debate is so tedious.

Meanwhile, because the world has gone mad, no one should assume that Paz won’t win. The message must go forth to those responsible for Paz’s immigration file: Israel’s democracy is alive and well, and as rollicking – and frustrating – as ever. ■

Hyphenated Israel: the next phase of nationhood?



Sara Horowitz

When my brother made aliyah with his new bride in the 1970s, he chose a neighbourhood that had few other American olim, joined a synagogue that was not primarily anglophone, and plunged into his professional life in Hebrew. He used to tell me, “If I wanted to live in New York, I would have stayed in New York.”

He and my sister-in-law began using their Hebrew names, and they gave each of their children Israeli names. Their children’s circles of friends encompassed young people from diverse backgrounds, and they eventually married people whose family origins differed widely from their own. In these choices and natural inclinations, my family exemplifies the national ideology that characterized the founding of the State of Israel and its de-

velopment for decades: that Jews, wherever they may hail from, are one people, and that in coming to the Jewish state, they take on the mantle of Israeliness.

To Americans, the model felt familiar. It followed the rubric of the “melting pot,” the metaphor long used to describe the process by which immigrants from all over were to adapt to the United States. Much more than Canadians, American immigrants were expected to speak only English (ideally, without a foreign accent), take on American (that is, Anglo-Saxon) names, eat American (rather than ethnic) foods and generally blend in. This, people felt, was the best path to actualizing the American ideals of equality.

Yet this “melting” of differences into a uniform “Americanness” was not without cost. Jews, for example, worried that, pursued fully, the “melting pot” was a recipe for assimilation. And Jews were not the only group to rethink the ideal of a homogeneous culture. By the last quarter of the 20th century, many ethnic and cultural groups began to resist the pull to erase their origins in order to

fit into the American whole. Under the mood of what came to be called identity politics, they began insisting on hyphenated identities – Jewish-American, Italian-American, African-American. Eventually, the hyphen disappeared, but the notion of a hyphenated or hybrid identity took hold. One might even say that this is one arena where Canada, with its metaphor of the cultural “mosaic,” was well ahead of its neighbour to the south, envisioning a kind of nation-building that countenanced diversity.

It may be that in Israel, too, there is a rethinking of what constitutes Israeliness – that the blending of olim from different diasporic locales into a singular Israeli entity has begun to morph into a different cultural model.

This summer, under the aegis of the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies at Brandeis University, I participated in an intensive program for university professors who teach courses about Israel. As part of the program, we met with representatives of a wide range of constituencies in Israel. We were struck, again and again, by what I think of as

the reclaiming of the particular among young adults, people in their 20s and 30s. Young Russian Jews, for example – children of Russian olim, or olim themselves – talked about reclaiming Russian first names, keeping the Russian language alive in their communities, and reading and even writing literature in Russian. Similarly, young Ethiopian Jews – olim or children of olim – were reclaiming Amharic first names, often against the impulses of their parents to adopt and confer Hebrew names. We met with Mizrahi Jews who were also reasserting a connection with their origins, whether Iraqi, Tunisian, Yemeni or Moroccan.

And we could not help but think: were we seeing the birth of hyphenated Israeliness, a proud assertion of ethnicity emerging from what had been envisioned as a kind of melting pot? If so, we should not be surprised. Almost 70 years into statehood, Israeliness is firmly enough established to allow for a celebration of diversity, of the richness of Jewish life and culture developed in all parts of the globe, and carried into new homes. ■