

Does Israel Teach Anti-Arab Bigotry?

Israel is experiencing a protest movement for “social justice” as are other countries in the Middle East and Europe. But the Israeli version seeks a more equitable society for Jewish citizens while sidestepping the plight of Palestinians, what Lawrence Davidson sees as the result of intense anti-Arab indoctrination.

By Lawrence Davidson

Over the last ten years, there have been periodic outbursts of rage over the alleged anti-Semitic nature of Palestinian textbooks. Most of these episodes have been instigated by an Israeli-based organization called the Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace (aka, the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education).

However, the Center’s conclusions have been corroborated only by other Israeli institutions such as Palestinian Media Watch. And, not surprisingly, almost all independent investigations examining the same issue have come up with very different conclusions.

These non-Zionist sources include The Nation magazine, which published a report on Palestinian textbooks in 2001; the George Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research, reporting in 2002; the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information, reporting in 2004; and the U.S. State Department Report of 2009. They all found that Palestinian textbooks did not preach anti-Semitism.

According to one Israeli journalist, Akiva Eldar, the Center does sloppy work. It “routinely feeds the media with excerpts from ‘Palestinian’ textbooks that call for Israel’s annihilation [without] bothering to point out that the texts quoted in fact come from Egypt and Jordan.”

Nathan Brown, a professor of political science at George Washington University who did his own study on the subject in 2000, said Palestinian textbooks now in use, which replaced older ones published in Egypt and Jordan, do not teach anti-Semitism, but “they tell history from a Palestinian point of view.”

It might very well be that it is this fact that the Zionists cannot abide and purposefully mistake a Palestinian viewpoint for anti-Semitism.

Here is another not very surprising fact: When it comes to choosing which set of reports to support, American politicians will almost always go with the Zionist versions. Take then-Sen. Hillary Clinton who, in 2007, denounced Palestinian textbooks, saying they “don’t give Palestinian children an education, they give

them an indoctrination.”

How did she know? Well, Israel’s Palestinian Media Watch told her so, and she did not have the foresight to fact-check the assertion before going public.

While the Palestinian textbooks don’t teach hatred of Jewish Israelis, the reality of daily life under occupation surely does. Those “facts on the ground” and not the textbooks supply the most powerful form of education for Palestinian youth.

Although in 2009 the U.S. State Department found that Palestinian textbooks were not the products of anti-Semites, there will be yet another Department-sponsored “comprehensive and independent” study in 2011. This time, the investigation will look at “incitement” caused by bias in both Israeli and Palestinian textbooks.

When this happens, one can only hope the investigators take a look at the work of the Israeli scholar Nurit Peled-Elhanan. She is a professor of language and education at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and also the daughter of the famous Israeli general turned peace activist, Matti Peled.

Peled-Elhanan has recently written a book titled Palestine in Israeli School Books: Ideology and Propaganda in Education. The book, which will be published this month in the United Kingdom, covers the content of Israeli textbooks over the past five years and concludes that Palestinians are never referred to as such “unless the context is terrorism.” Otherwise, they are referred to as Arabs.

And Arabs are collectively presented as “vile and deviant and criminal, people who do not pay taxes, people who live off the state, who don’t want to develop. ... You never see [in the textbooks] a Palestinian child or doctor or teacher or engineer or modern farmer.”

In contrast, she finds that Palestinian textbooks, even while telling history from a Palestinian point of view, “distinguish between Zionists and Jews”; they tend to take a stand “against Zionists, not against Jews.”

Peled-Elhanan makes a link between what Israeli children are taught and how they later behave when drafted into the country’s military services.

“One question that bothers many people is how do you explain the cruel behavior of Israeli soldiers towards Palestinians, an indifference to human suffering, the inflicting of suffering. ... I think the major reason for that is education.”

Historically, the mistreatment of Palestinians, including the periodic massacre of them, is taught to Israelis as something that is “unfortunate” but ultimately

necessary and “good” for the survival of the state. In Peled-Elhanan’s opinion, Palestinian terrorist attacks are “the direct consequence of the oppression, slavery, humiliation and the state of siege imposed on the Palestinians.”

This Israeli process of educating children to hate and to feel prejudice is, of course, exactly what the Zionists accuse the Palestinians of doing. It turns out that all this time, while leveling charges of incitement at the Palestinian educational process, the Israelis have been practicing the same sort of indoctrination on their own children.

This revelation fills Peled-Elhanan with despair, lamenting that “I only see the path to fascism” for Israel.

Making Choices

Keeping the theme of education in mind, let us shift attention to the unprecedented protests now going on in Israel. For the last two weeks, massive demonstrations have hit all of Israel’s major cities. “Tent cities” have sprung up in some 40 locations. All of these protests are demanding “social justice.”

What, in this case, does social justice mean? It means addressing all the legitimate, standard-of-living problems that beset most of the Israeli demonstrators: soaring costs of food and housing, declining social services and the like. All of these are the predictable consequences of unregulated capitalism and neo-liberal governments.

A significant number of Israelis have decided that this lack of social justice has gone far enough. A recent poll shows that 88 percent of the citizenry supports the protests.

However, this is not entirely a good thing. In order to maintain such support, coming as it does from almost all sections of Israeli political life, the protest leaders now endeavor to remain “non-political” and “rooted squarely in the mainstream consensus.”

This is, of course, naive. The Israelis live in a skewed “democratic” political environment with a right-wing government that is not going to acquiesce to their demands, except to throw them an occasional bone, unless the protesters can command the votes to shape the outcome of elections. Like it or not, that is the way their system works.

There are other problems. In order to be “rooted in the mainstream consensus,” the protest leaders are staying away from the issue of social justice for the Palestinians. In Israel proper, that means turning their backs on the plight of

over 20 percent of the population.

What sort of social justice is that? Well, it is social justice as defined by people educated in the system described by Nurit Peled-Elhanan. That is why the protest leaders can happily solicit the support of Naftali Bennett, the thoroughly despicable leader of the colonial/settler movement, but not any of the leaders of the Arab-Israeli community.

By not taking a social-justice-for-all stand, the protest movement leaders have registered their acceptance of the “justice for Jews only” system to which they were educated. This in itself is a political act which will make them vulnerable to being picked apart with pseudo-solutions that offer some of them a little while denying others a lot.

Already, as reported by Haaretz, dozens of members of the Knesset have petitioned Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to “solve the housing crisis by building in the West Bank.” Soon thereafter, the government announced approval for “1,600 more settler homes” in East Jerusalem, with 2,700 more to come later.

That is the sort of solution this protest movement will get unless it can overcome the education/indoctrination and go into politics in a way that applies social justice to all citizens.

In all societies, there are two major goals for education: one is vocational and the other is acculturation. So, one important reason for education is to prepare young people for the job market. The other is to educate them to be “good citizens.”

What this latter goal means depends on the society one is raised in. In the old Soviet Union, becoming a good citizen meant being acculturated to a nationalist brand of communism, as is still the case today in China. In the United States, it means becoming a believer in the American version of freedom, both political and economic. And, in Israel, being a good citizen means becoming a believing Zionist.

The objective of acculturation means that education always has, and probably always will have, a strong dose of indoctrination attached to it. That the Zionists should find it shocking that the Palestinians want to use education for their version of indoctrination and acculturation is a sheer double standard.

And, finally, that the leaders of the protest movement in Israel so pointedly exclude the plight of the Palestinians is testimony to the success of their own education/indoctrination within the apartheid model.

You see, most of us really are what we are educated to be.

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