Evaluation of Prof. Lior Libman’s Research

I am delighted to provide this evaluation for Prof. Libman, who is being considered for a tenured position in Judaic Studies at Binghamton University. I have had the pleasure of knowing Prof. Libman for more than twenty years and have closely observed her impressive evolution from a remarkable student to an eminent young scholar in the field of Israel Studies. After a thorough examination of Prof. Libman’s work, I am convinced that she is among the most gifted, original, and knowledgeable scholars with whom I have had the privilege to associate. Her studies embody an extraordinary blend of precision, depth, creativity, and innovation. Prof. Libman’s pioneering research in the areas of Zionism, the kibbutz, Hebrew Literature, and the history of Israel not only provides fresh perspectives on well-studied subjects but also dares to challenge some of the most widely accepted assumptions about them.

Prof. Libman’s enormous contributions to the intersecting fields of Israeli History, Hebrew Literature, and Zionism lie, in my view, in three interconnected innovations. Firstly, Prof. Libman’s diverse studies explore the kibbutz as an image or icon, as represented in the works of prominent kibbutz members. This exploration of the kibbutz’s “iconization” by its members is not only a novel approach to the history of the kibbutz but also offers a fresh perspective on the Zionist political imagination. Specifically, it examines how the representation of one of its core icons, the kibbutz, functioned as an ideological apparatus. I am unaware of any other study that investigates the kibbutz from this viewpoint or for this purpose.

Secondly, Prof. Libman illustrates how kibbutz members experienced the establishment of the State of Israel as a trauma. This presents a new view on the internal divisions within Zionism that entirely reshapes our understanding of the kibbutz’s interaction with Israeli statehood. None of the works in this field provide such an understanding of internal Zionist discord, and most fail to infer the political implications that Prof. Libman emphasizes in her studies.

Thirdly, Prof. Libman is, to my knowledge, the first to address the conflict between the political theology of the state and that of the kibbutz. Her examination of political theology in this context is exceptional and, to me, represents the most revealing aspect of her work. Prof. Libman instructs us on how to comprehend the Hassidic foundations underpinning the political iconization of the kibbutz and explains how this Hassidic theology is anchored in immanent mystical symbolism that remains foreign to the transcendent authority of the state, paralleling Carl Schmitt’s schema.

Prof. Libman convincingly argues that without an understanding of political theology, any historical interpretation of the kibbutz lacks a crucial element. In particular, the kibbutz actively negates the messianic moment symbolized by the state. This is a groundbreaking argument. Most works in this field, such as Dror’s *Kibbutz and Judaism*, Omer-Sherman’s *Imagining the Kibbutz*, and Pauker’s *When the Pioneers Wanted a Home*, tend to reinforce rather than challenge not only the secular image of the kibbutz but also a simplistic, arguably narrow interpretation of what such a secular self-perception implies. None provide a comprehensive analysis of the Hassidic roots of the kibbutz’s “secular” perspective or highlight the discord between the Schmittian theo-politics of the state and the secularized Jewish messianism of the kibbutz. Prof. Libman is the first to suggest that there were two conflicting political theologies regarding the mechanism of redemption and the fulfillment (or non-fulfillment) of the messianic moment.

Her manuscript, *State of Shock: The Kibbutz in Israel from Avant-Garde to Fetish, 1948-1955*, which I have read in its entirety, exemplifies the interlocking of the issues I briefly outlined previously. In this exceptional work, Professor Libman demonstrates her originality and excellence by critically examining the representation of the kibbutz in the writings of its leaders and intellectuals during the decade following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. She meticulously analyzes an impressive range of primary sources and elucidates the trauma associated with the founding of the state; the resulting shift in the kibbutz’s representation (perceived as an ahistorical, stagnant, and idolized totem); and the conflict between two distinct political theologies (state and kibbutz). Subsequently, she investigates a variety of contexts where these issues manifested, such as the distinction between “land” and “state,” attitudes towards militarism and war, resistance to state control, and alignment with the Soviet Union. These diverse yet intersecting dynamic discussions and fervent debates reveal how adherence to the image of the kibbutz led to lamenting the establishment of the State of Israel. It was regarded as a failed realization of the messianic moment that resists realization. To my knowledge, this comprehensive and compelling discussion is the first presentation of the interplay between these various issues in academic work.

Given that the kibbutz is one of the most prominent Zionist icons, there is extensive literature on the subject. However, I am not aware of any other book that delivers such a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the fluctuations in the kibbutz’s image, their theo-political origins, and their societal and political implications. Essentially, Professor Libman explores a well-studied theme (the kibbutz) through a completely new lens, shedding light thereby on entirely new issues. Libman’s work invites comparison to Henry Near’s seminal study of the kibbutz movement. Despite their distinct approaches, Professor Libman’s work echoes Near in its endeavor to identify critical questions and issues related to the history of the kibbutz. However, Libman emphasizes how the kibbutz’s mission, particularly its ethos of *hagshama*, engaged in a continuous dialogue with theological legacies that Near’s study downplays. This underlines the fact that Professor Libman’s book delivers a more pertinent analysis of social and political elements that, in my opinion, are notably present in the current Israeli political crisis.

The book also exhibits Prof. Libman’s unique interdisciplinary approach, which draws from historical analysis, literary theories, and political science. The academic world tends to be firmly established in disciplines with their own “insider” discourse. Prof. Libman’s work presents an antithesis to this norm. In many of her papers, such as “Shadow over the Land without Shade,” “A Symbol which Fails to Symbolize,” and “The ‘State of Shock’ of Hakkibutz HaMeuchad,” she integrates historical analysis with critical literary theories. Her paper, “A Symbol that Fails to Symbolize,” is particularly commendable as it introduces the relationship between aesthetics and theology into the study of Hebrew Literature. In her book, Prof. Libman goes even further. By analyzing a vast array of primary and secondary sources, including archival materials and literary texts from various genres (many translated into English for the first time), she skillfully applies historiographic insights to a critical evaluation of literary texts that are central to the Israeli literary canon.

The range, scope, and quality of Prof. Libman’s publications are, I believe, equivalent to a book. She has completed a manuscript currently under review at the prestigious UPenn Press, and her papers are predominantly published or accepted for publication in peer-reviewed journals central to her field, such as *Iyyunim BeTkumat Yisrael* and *Mikan*. Remarkably, she has already established a name in the field at this early stage of her academic career. She serves as co-chair and co-director of central conferences in her field like AIS and EAIS, where she also frequently presents her work. Many distinguished institutions, such as Yale, University College London, and UMass Amherst have invited her to lecture, and she also serves as a reviewer for several journals. Prof. Libman also presents rich and promising future trajectories for future work, having outlined two different monographs already on her agenda. These indisputably demonstrate the ingenuity, breadth, and richness of Prof. Libman’s intellectual world, and I do not doubt that she has the expertise and familiarity with the subject matters of these planned monographs. However, I would recommend focusing on one project at a time to avoid overreaching.

In conclusion, I strongly support Prof. Libman’s promotion to a tenure position at your institution. I cannot overstate the quality of her work and her contributions to the fields of Hebrew Literature, the history of Israel, and Zionism. Her scholarly work is exceptional and illustrates why Prof. Libman has secured a position as a leading voice in Israel Studies. Prof. Libman is a wellspring of knowledge and a source of innovative and revolutionary scholarship. I am confident in her bright scholarly future.