**Europe Through Israeli Eyes**

**Israel and the Continent after the Holocaust**

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**Synopsis**

*Europe through Israeli Eyes* explores Israeli perceptions of the continent in the second half of the 20th century. It brings together for the first time in a comprehensive way Israeli public debates about the political and economic dimensions of the continent for their country, with those about its cultural impact and influences. In doing so, it reveals a neglected but crucial dimension of Israeli society and state, makes an important contribution to the study of the European idea, and transforms our understanding of Israeli-European relations.

This is not a marginal, obscure or specialized subject. The Zionist movement itself and many of the state’s founders were born on the continent, and European influences were central to the formation of the state. Accordingly, Israel’s ties to Europe figure prominently in academic discussions of the founding of the state and its entanglement with European (settler) colonialism, as well as in many contemporary political debates, which often adopt dichotomous and partisan approaches. One perspective portrays Israel as a European or Western outpost in the Middle East, in short as “Euro-Israel.” In contrast, another perspective downplays the country’s connections to European movements and phenomena, such as colonialism, and highlights the Jewish break with Europe in the face of the Holocaust. By investigating Israeli views and perceptions of the continent during the second half of the twentieth century *Europe through Israeli Eyes* challenges such bifurcated representations. The book emphasizes the centrality of the continent for Israelis during this period, while at the same time highlighting its deeply Janus-faced nature in Israeli eyes, which engendered deeply ambivalent attitudes toward Europe alongside fierce debates about the country’s own social outlook and geocultural affiliations.

Exploring Israeli conceptions of Europe in a systematic fashion is challenging because the concept of Europe itself is difficult to grasp: it can refer not only to a geographical entity, but also to ideas and concepts, political visions, cultural influences, societal discourses, and more. *Europe through Israeli Eyes* has identified several distinct contexts in which Israelis concretely experienced Europe and debated its meaning, influences, and significance for their own country.

The book examines the formative period from the establishment of the state in 1948 to the turn of the millennium, when the expansion of the EU on the one hand, and the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the outbreak of the Second Intifada on the other, profoundly altered European-Israeli relations. A first part deals with perceptions of Europe in political and economic debates, starting with the institution that came to represent the idea of Europe like no other in the post-war period: the European Economic Community (EEC/EU). But while close ties with Western Europe in the form of the EEC/EU were vital to Israelis, they also kept a close eye on “Eastern Europe” – that is the Soviet Union and its satellites - not least because most of the country’s founders came from that region. Finally, Israelis also had a lively debate about Europe in the form of French and British colonial projects in the region. By bringing together these different aspects, the book paints a nuanced and comprehensive picture of what Europe represented to Israelis.

The second part of the book explores different ways in which Israelis participated in European culture. On the one hand, Israelis competed in various continental sports leagues and participated in Europe’s largest music festival, the Eurovision Song Contest. The book reveals that these were not just different forms of leisure and recreation, but that Israelis in all three contexts fiercely debated the influence and meaning of Europe for their own society. This is all the more pertinent because the question of European influences on Israeli society directly touched on one of the major tensions in Israeli society, the divide between Jews of European heritage (Ashkenazim) and Jews from the Middle East and North Africa (Mizrahim). The fields of sports, music, and travel offer an important window into such debates, and help paint a nuanced picture of the Israeli engagement with Europe and its culture.

*Europe Through Israeli Eyes* contributes to current scholarly discourse on the idea of Europe, which relates to the continent not as a geographical, political, or social reality, but as a subject that is constantly re-described, re-invented, re-interpreted, and questioned through various narratives and discourses. In an attempt to challenge the Eurocentrism that has long been inscribed in narratives of Europe, scholars are increasingly focusing on the view of Europe from its margins. Located in Asia and strongly influenced by European, North African, and Middle Eastern cultures, Israel offers a distinctive contribution to these discussions. Defying clear binary categories, the Israeli case illustrates the dynamics and interdependencies of the two continents and their cultures. Israelis’ understandings of Europe and its significance for their own state and society, the book shows, has had a central influence not only on Israeli-European relations, but also on the Jewish state’s integration into Asia.

The main source material for the book consists of thousands of articles and graphic caricatures from the country’s major Hebrew-language daily newspapers as well as a series of popular Hebrew-language travel guides to Europe. My work capitalizes on the recent advanced digitization of these media, which has opened new research vistas by enabling extensive searching and tracing of specialized subjects and themes. These publications were crucial in shaping public opinion within mainstream Zionist society. The book’s bottom-up approach and focus on popular culture represent a crucial addition to the literature on Israeli-European relations, which has been dominated by works on political negotiations and intellectual discourses. By examining the Zionist public sphere, it sheds important new light on the ideas and concepts, as well as the concrete realities, that Israelis associate with Europe and their assessment of the continent's impact on their own country.

**Outline of the Content**

The book contains six chapters framed by an introduction and an epilogue. The chapters are organized thematically rather than chronologically. Each chapter deals with a different context in which Israelis encountered the continent, highlighting distinct aspects of what “Europe” meant to Israelis in the second half of the twentieth century.

Introduction: Jews and Europe

The introduction outlines the main arguments of the book and provides a summary of the historical context and geopolitical realities against which Israelis engaged with Europe in the second half of the 20th century. It situates my work in the existing literature on European-Israeli relations, as well as in scholarly discussions about the “idea of Europe” in order to prepare the ground for consideration of Israeli perceptions of the continent.

*Part 1: Europe’s Different Faces*

The first part (chapters 1-3) is dedicated to the Israeli discourse surrounding the formation of European political and economic frameworks in response to the two major fault lines that defined significant portions of the period: “east-west” and “north-south.”

Chapter I: Between Memory and Realpolitik: Israeli Perceptions of the EEC

The first Chapter traces Israeli media discussions about the creation and development of the EEC/EU up to the Oslo peace process in the 1990s and the EU’s Association Agreement with Israel in 2000. Indeed, Israelis debated not only the economic and political relevance of this body, but also its idealistic goals of European rapprochement after World War II. The chapter highlights conflicting attitudes toward the postwar European project, arguing that it was Western Europe’s profound importance to the Jewish state through its geographical and, in many ways, ideological proximity that created this ambivalence.

Chapter II: Dissociating from the Past: Israelis Perspectives on Eastern Europe

The emergence of the EEC led to a strong focus on the western parts of the continent. Meanwhile, Central and Eastern European countries disappeared behind the Iron Curtain. Yet, as chapter 2 shows, the Warsaw Pact countries remained extremely important to Israelis nonetheless, both in terms of national policy and because of their Jewish heritage and the Jews who remained in the region. The chapter examines the ideas Israelis associated with Central and Eastern Europe and how these changed throughout the decades of the Cold War and in the years after the breakdown of the Soviet Union. The rupture with Central and Eastern Europe and the construction of the Soviet Union as an “external other,” I argue, helped Israelis solidify their self-image as a Western state while deepening their estrangement from the former centers of Ashkenazi Jewry.

Chapter III: Europe in Asia and Africa: Israeli Debates on Colonialism

European influence, however, extended far beyond the continent itself. For Israelis, this manifested itself especially in the form of British and French colonial ventures in North Africa and the Middle East. The two powers were also the Jewish state’s most important allies in the 1950s and 1960s, but relations worsened when the two started dismantling their colonial regimes and transforming their relations with the former subalterns. Such issues were all the more crucial to Israelis, as their state was itself accused as being merely another European colonial project. Chapter 3 thus traces the media discussions about European colonialism and its legacy. These debates were shaped not only by the attempts of the Jewish state between Europe and Asia, but also by tensions between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim and the question of the geo-cultural outlook of the state. These tensions, as well as the broader dynamics between Europe and the Afro-Asian world, I argue, complicated Israelis’ ability to find their place on the continent.

*Part 2: Experiencing Europe through Culture and Travel*

The second part of the book (chapters 4-6) is devoted to three contexts in which a wider Israeli public experienced Europe in a more “tangible” manner: through the media spectacle of Eurovision, through Israeli participation in European sports leagues, and through travel to Europe.

Chapter IV: Between all the Stools? Israeli Sport in Search of International Frameworks

The fourth Chapter looks at debates about the fate of the two most popular team sports in Israel, soccer and basketball. Israel’s problematic geopolitical circumstances found a very real expression in the country’s international sporting affiliations. While some disciplines, like basketball, were integrated into European frameworks early on, other athletes joined Asian leagues, most prominently the country’s soccer teams. However, when the political atmosphere in Asia deteriorated in the 1970s, the Israeli Football Association was expelled from the Asian leagues and subsequently attempted to enter the European ones. Israeli sports, one commentator bemoaned this situation, sat between all the stools. Chapter 4 demonstrates that these issues sparked debates about Israel’s geocultural orientation and allegiance far beyond the sports arena. These debates illustrate that Israelis always discussed Europe in the context of and in dynamic with other geo-cultural connections and influences. Israeli images of Europe, the chapter makes clear, must therefore be understood in the context of these dynamics.

Chapter V: Singing a Song for Europe: Israel in the Eurovision Song Contest

This chapter traces Israeli participation in the biggest and most popular European music festival, the Eurovision Song Contest. Due to their membership in the European Broadcasting Union, Israelis were eligible to join the contest, which they did regularly from 1973. As one of the few participants located outside of the geographical borders of the continent, Eurovision challenged Israelis to grapple with their different affiliations with Europe and its institutions. Therefore, media coverage of the competition did not solely focus on artistic aspects but also encompassed a range of topics pertaining to the evolving dynamics of European-Israeli relations. These included the current state of political relations, as well as discourses on European-Jewish history and its significance for Israel. Focusing on these issues, I argue that participation in the annual spectacle became an important ritual that helps Israelis come to terms with their complex relationship with the continent.

Chapter VI: Between Leisure Trip and Heritage Tourism: Hebrew Tour Guides to Europe

Israelis participated in the European cultural sphere also quite concretely through travel. Its proximity as well as highly developed tourism industry turned it into the most popular destination of Israeli leisure tourism. At the same time, Europe offered many places of great historical significance to the Jewish tourist. In particular, the memory of the Holocaust made it impossible for Israeli visitors to enjoy the continent’s attractions without reservation. Hebrew-language travel guide books directed readers to sites of particular interest to the Israeli public, provided instructions for Israeli travelers, and reflected their experiences and expectations, thereby constructing a specific Jewish-Israeli view of Europe. Chapter 6 analyses four of such guidebooks that were published in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s and enjoyed enormous popularity, arguing that the tensions between leisure and heritage aspects of Jewish-Israeli tourism were crucial in shaping the perspective of Hebrew guidebooks to the continent.

Epilogue: A Janus-Faced Continent

Finally, the epilogue summarizes the findings of the individual chapters and thus brings to the fore the essential tensions and ambivalences inherent in the Israeli view of Europe. It shows that these characteristics remain highly relevant despite the significant social and political changes that have taken place since the 2000s, thus providing an essential insight into contemporary Israeli-European relations as well.

**Historiography**

The book offers a unique approach to exploring the idea of Europe, integrating political and economic inquiry with the disciplines of sports history, popular culture, and travel literature. This focus on social and political history stands out in a field traditionally dominated by political scientists and intellectual historians.

It is in conversation with the burgeoning field of scholarship on the idea of Europe and, in particular, with studies that challenge tendencies towards Euro-centrim and Euro-universalism, such as “Inventing Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality” (Gerard Delanty, 1995), “The Pursuit of Europe: A History” (Anthony Pagden, 2022), “The Idea of Europe: A Critical History” (Shane Weller, 2021). While a growing body of works attempts to decenter Western European experiences by focusing on narratives from its eastern half or from the Middle East, only two books and a few scattered articles on Israeli perceptions of Europe have been published to date. However, neither “Israel and Europe: An Appraisal in History” (Howard Sachar, 1998) nor “Glorious, Accursed Europe” (Jehuda Reinharz/ Yaacov Shavit, 2010) deal with Israeli views on Europe in a systematic fashion, and both tend to conflate Israeli relations to individual countries, such as Germany or France, with Europe.

In recent decades, there has been an enormous interest in Israeli-European relations, for example “Israel and the European Union: between rhetoric and reality “ (Raffaella Del Sarto, 2014), “Uneasy Neighbors: Israel and the European Union (Sharon Pardo and Joel Peters, 2009), “Normative Power Europe Meets Israel: Perceptions and Realities” (Sharon Pardo, 2015), “Israel’s Path to Europe: The Negotiations for a Preferential Agreement, 1957–1970” (Gadi Heimann and Lior Herman, 2018). Most of this literature focuses exclusively on the negotiations and agreements between the Jewish state and the EEC/EU. While the book is in conversation with this literature, it transcends the limited focus on the western parts of the continent, thereby adding an important and new angle to this field.

The book also contributes to the debates about societal tensions in Israel. Scholars have by now pointed at a nuanced picture of the discrimination of Middle Eastern Jews by those of European heritage during the early decades of Israel’s existence, for example “The Mizrahi Era of Rebellion: Israel’s Forgotten Civil Rights Struggle 1948-1966” (Bryan Roby, 2015), “The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity “(Yehouda Shenhav, 2006), “On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and other Displacements (Ela Shohat, 2017). Nevertheless, while this literature posits that the Ashkenazi elite of the state intend to Europeanize and Westernize the Mizrahim in order to form a state based on European models, it eschews a more profound examination of the influence of Europe on Israeli society. Instead, it often employs a simplified terminology, referring to this phenomenon as “Euro-Israel.” This view, however, essentializes European influences, just like the Eurocentric worldview of those these scholars rightly criticize. The book is an important corrective, as it offers a more nuanced view of Israeli perceptions of the continent that also considers intra-Israeli tension.

**Market**

*Europe Through Israeli Eyes* has the potential of becoming a seminal contribution to scholarship as it sheds important light on central aspects of Israeli society, Israeli-European relations, as well as the idea of Europe. As first comprehensive study Israeli perceptions of Europe, it will attract special attention among a great variety of disciplines, ranging from Jewish and Israeli history, Europe and European foreign relations to scholars interested in popular culture.

The topic is timely in many ways. The idea of a united Europe has faced growing challenges from populist forces over the past decade. With these challenges has come increased public and scholarly attention to the issue, which is likely to continue in the coming years as the battles between supporters of a strong European Union and its critics intensify.

What is more, European-Israeli relations are of high relevance both not only to Israel but also to Europe due to their shared history, but also the proximity and geopolitical significance of the Middle East. Accordingly, there has been a longstanding interest in these relations both from scholars and the wider public. With the current geopolitical ruptures in the wake of the Israel-Hamas War, such issues have gained even more urgency.

Finally, Israel has witnessed harsh societal and political struggles about the outlook of state and society during the last years, most prominently in form of the struggles over judicial reform in 2023. The question of European influences on the society have been part of these frictions, not least due to the re-emergence of tensions between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim.

For all these reasons, I believe that the book will not only appeal to scholars and students, but also to a wider public in the US, Israel and Europe.

**Format and Timetable**

The manuscript totals about 115,000 words. As it draws upon contemporary media, it features several graphic caricatures, most of which are discussed in the text, as well as some pictures from the travel guides. These enrich the book, as they well capture the Israeli zeitgeist and thinking about Europe.

All six of the book’s main chapters exist in draft versions. I am currently working on the introduction and epilogue, as well as on revising and improving individual chapters. I have published three articles related to this project, two on Israeli participation in Eurovision and one on Israeli soccer in Asia. Chapters 4 and 5 are in conversation with these articles but make their own distinct contributions. I intend to finish the manuscript within the next 3-6 months.