

DeProgram Program

From the Mind of Sha'i ben-Tekoa
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“Edward Said, My Rock-Throwing Teacher”

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Exactly a year ago, Justus Reid Weiner revealed in Commentary that Edward Said, professor of English at Columbia University-cum-PLO propagandist, had never had the childhood in Jerusalem he long claimed for himself ("My Beautiful Old House' and Other Fabrications by Edward Said," September 1999.)

I, for one, was not surprised: I had been a student of Said's at Columbia College before the Six-Day War of 1967--before, that is, he reconstituted himself as an Ancient Palestinian, a nationality allegedly native to the Holy Land since at least the Third Day of Creation. At that time, if he advertised himself as anything, it was as a Lebanese-Egyptian, which jibes with Weiner's revelations. Indeed, Said himself would write in his 1979 book, *The Question of Palestine*, that "for a long time the general Arab umbrella covered my specific history, adequately it seemed," which was his oblique, Arabesque way of saying that he had not been in the habit of calling himself a Palestinian at all.

But this past July, one morning as I sipped my coffee, a picture of my old professor jumped out at me from my local Israeli newspaper. There he was, in baseball cap and windbreaker, standing at the Lebanese border with Israel, heroically throwing rocks over the fence at Jews in uniform who he knew would not respond.

The picture, taken by a photographer for Agence France Presse, would soon be flashed around the world and occasion a fair degree of comment, including from yours truly on Israeli radio and the World Wide Web, where I do commentary in English for IsraelNationalNews. Said himself issued a statement that he did not see any soldiers in the vicinity but had been "infected" by the "spirit of the place" to make a "symbolic gesture"; nor did he have any idea "that the media people were there or that (he) was the object of attention." According to eyewitness and other accounts, every verifiable part of this statement is false. Again, hardly a surprise--but, thanks to this photograph, a little mystery of many years' standing concerning this scholar-poseur began to resolve itself.

As I say, I studied with Said back in 1966 as one of many New York Jewish intellectuals -in-training at Columbia who secretly aspired to become the next Philip Roth or Norman

Mailer. Like others, I had registered for a required survey course in 18th-century English literature with this as yet, if not infamous, then unfamous and untenured thirty-one-year-old lecturer.

The fact that Asst. Prof. Said was an Arab had nothing to do with anything. One evening, a bunch of us invited him to dinner at an off-campus apartment, and a pleasant time was had by all. He was a professor of literature, not Middle Eastern politics, and books, not the plight of any Ancient Palestinians--a people as yet unmentioned in any UN, let alone League of Nations, document--were our table-talk. Virtually no one, pre-1967, used the term Palestinian, and neither did he.

This, remember, was before Israel, fighting for its life, would capture the high ground and come into occupation of what the New York Times stylebook then called "the western bank of the Jordan River." At the time, the future "West Bank" was still entirely under Jordanian rule and perfectly judenrein, with nobody chastising Israel for being an obstacle to a state for any ancient nationality, let alone a "racist, fascist, imperialist aggressor, " as it would soon become known in Said's circles.

For me, Said's survey course was the last straw in my career as an English major. One big reason I quit was the industrial-strength boredom of that class. Not that he was unenergetic, or unprepared, or uninformed when it came to the syllabus: Samuel Johnson, Samuel Richardson, Alexander Pope, that crowd. But there was something missing in his presentation--in him, really-- that only now, 34 years later, have I finally begun to comprehend.

Although he was fluent in English and had grown up in a wealthy, English-speaking household; although he had attended the exclusive New England prep school Mount Hermon (which name appears 14 times in the Hebrew Bible, if never in the Qu'ran, or any Ancient Palestinian text), before going on to earn degrees at Princeton and Harvard, Said never made 18th-century England come alive. There was some kind of fog between, on the one hand, his knowledge of the facts of English culture and civilization and, on the other, his sensibility (to use a fine 18th-century word). What was it?

The photograph of my former Egyptian-Lebanese prof as he reared back, like a pitcher on the mound, to hurl rocks at Jews who he had reason to know would do nothing in retaliation, called to mind two items of English literature. The first was *An Account of the Manners & Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836) by the famous English Orientalist Edward William Lane, who spent many years living and traveling in the Middle East; in this work, Lane describes how--for fun--Arab riffraff would throw stones in the street at passing Jews, safe in the certainty that they would not hit back. The second was a record of a visit to Jerusalem in 1855 by Moses Montefiore, the British Jewish philanthropist, who had petitioned the Sultan in Constantinople (so he writes) for permission to construct a large awning extending from the Temple Mount plateau over the Western Wall because Arabs--for fun--liked to stand on top and pelt the Jews praying below--who they knew would not hit back.

The Arab intifada too, of the late 1980's, was, after all, a mass, prolonged case of stoning Jews by "street-Arabs," to use a term from the Oxford English Dictionary, who would often heroically employ their little brothers and sisters as shields, knowing that Israel's soldiers would not use deadly force against children and that, on the rare occasion when a child did get hurt, it would at least make great footage on CNN.

Last year, thanks to Justus Weiner and Commentary, Edward Said's veneer as a refugee was peeled away. And now, thanks to Agence France Presse, sans the Saville Row duds of a wealthy academic, striking a pose fit for a redneck pelting blacks, or a street-Arab stoning Jews, he finally emerged as who he is.

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