

Ze'ev Rosenkranz. *Einstein before Israel: Zionist Icon or Iconoclast?*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. 364 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-14412-2.

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Is there a Jew more important to Jewish collective self-esteem than Albert Einstein? What is more touching than the genius's response to the offer of the second presidency of Israel (upon the death of Chaim Weizmann) in 1952, a paragon of self-deprecation? "I am deeply moved by the offer from our state of Israel, and at once saddened and ashamed that I cannot accept it. All my life I have dealt with objective matters, hence I lack both the natural aptitude and the experience to deal properly with people and to exercise official functions. For these reasons alone I should be unsuited to fulfill the duties of that high office, even if advancing age was not making increasing inroads on my strength. I am the more distressed over these circumstances because my relationship to the Jewish people has become my strongest human bond, ever since I became fully aware of our precarious situation in the world." [1]

Despite the embittered fragmentation of modern Jewry, the idolization of Albert Einstein is one of its preeminent and "depoliticized" ties of solidarity (p. vii). He is the most revered of any Jewish historical figure. This is understandable: Einstein was, after all, Einstein. He radically challenged and altered the scientific understanding of the world. Even among the vocal Jewish lunatic fringe there is little if any Einstein-trashing—despite the fact that Einstein was ultra-liberal, arch-

secular, ardently opposed to religious orthodoxies of any type, and thought that the only viable settlement in Palestine must recognize fundamental Jewish and Arab rights of nationality. Could there be any greater demonstration of *chutzpah* than to say "Einstein was wrong and I know better"? (For those less familiar with Yiddish, the classic definition of *chutzpah* is a kid who murders his parents and throws himself at the mercy of the court because he's an orphan.)

In its early decades the Zionist movement, which was far more marginal than mainstream from its inception in 1881 to the beginning of World War I, had its fortunes immeasurably boosted when well-known celebrities enlisted their support. Theodor Herzl himself was a significant actor in the Central European cultural scene, but he had nowhere near the stature of Max Nordau, whose public proclamation of sympathy for Zionism immediately trained the spotlight on the Basel congress of 1897. In the United States, the startling conversion of Louis Brandeis to Zionism in 1913 made it a formidable force in a country where it apparently had few of the prerequisites for success. But nobody gave the movement a filip as did Einstein when he made known his "affiliation with Jewish nationalism" in 1919 (pp. 2-3). To be sure, having Einstein on board meant marked gains for Zionist recruitment and

fundraising. His allegiance to the movement also fortified and elated their existing ranks: Einstein, the Zionist, was the most palpable sign that they were on the right track. Their Weltanschauung and requests—in the form of the Basel program and other pronouncements—could be underscored ever more strongly as the product of a sensible, even keen analysis of the current scene due to Einstein's endorsement.

But for all of the gravity of Einstein's espousal of Zionism, there has been little discussion—in the copious writing on Einstein—of the extent to which his own place in, and positions within, the movement were out of sync with its leadership. The biographies of Abraham Pais and Walter Isaacson are informative about Einstein the man, his scientific contributions, and his times. He was indeed a complex and even contradictory personality and his views about Zionism not always consistent. Although it is generally acknowledged that Einstein supported the initiative of Brit Shalom for a binational, expressly egalitarian Jewish and Arab state of Palestine, the fierceness of his opposition to the emerging shape of the Zionist movement, and his particular objections to a cause with which he had been most strongly identified—the Hebrew University of Jerusalem—are not well known. How Einstein came to be a Zionist, and the troubled character of his involvement up to the year of the Nazi takeover of power in 1933, is brilliantly explored in Ze'ev Rosenkranz's book, *Einstein before Israel: Zionist Icon or Iconoclast?*

Particularly in light of the controversy surrounding Peter Beinart's essays in the *New York Review of Books* (2010) and the publication of his *The Crisis of Zionism* (2012), Rosenkranz's work on Einstein is an unusually timely and important intervention. Although scholars of Zionism are well aware that there was a strong element of inner critique since the inception of the movement, Rosenkranz reminds us that Zionism was, historically, a big tent, and its most illustrious adherent held positions that are now identified with so-

called Israel bashers and self-hating Jews. Einstein loathed prejudice and national chauvinism, of any stripe, and bristled against the notion that one must be either "for" or "against" the institutions and policies that came to embody Zionism and the State of Israel. More than any other work that has appeared to date, Rosenkranz's excellent book shows us that Einstein did not simply object to the emerging relationships with Arabs. Outside of the Arab question, he was more than dismayed by the way that Hebrew University was being developed—in fact, quite fierce in his opposition. Einstein never publicly denounced or renounced his affiliation with either the Jewish State or its flagship university. But Rosenkranz demonstrates that Einstein's relationship with the movement was almost always tempestuous and his frustration with its political and educational leadership was frequently at fever-pitch. To say the least, Einstein's Zionism could scarcely be more alien to the pronouncements of Bibi Netanyahu and Avigdor Lieberman, which echo those of Menahem Ussiskin in 1930, which Einstein found repellent. "Displacing the Arabs from their soil," Einstein wrote, "is completely out of the question" (p. 213). Even Beinart and J-Street are conciliatory pussycats in comparison to the founder of the theory of relativity, who maintained that the best realization of Zionist aspirations would be "a 'center' (Zentralstelle) ... rather than a 'homestead' (Heimstätte)" (p. 215). Among his concrete proposals were that "all Jewish children should learn Arabic" (p. 216) and that Palestine be governed by nonpolitical and nonpartisan technocrats, as opposed to a normal parliamentary system.

Although this is a sophisticated, scholarly book, Rosenkranz's main arguments are fairly straightforward. First, Einstein's embrace of Zionism was related to the crises, some of which affected him personally, at the end of the Great War. Second, there was more than a small element of mutual exploitation, even "manipulation" (pp. 90-91) in Einstein's first foray into Zionist politics when he accompanied Chaim Weizmann on a trip

to the United States. Weizmann and the Zionists hoped to use Einstein to raise vast riches for the Keren Hayesod, the Palestine Foundation Fund—which never occurred. Weizmann intended this to be the chief instrument through which he could exert his control in the movement in order to circumvent Louis Brandeis, Julian Mack, Stephen S. Wise, and Henrietta Szold, who had coalesced as a coherent foil to his administration. To the extent that Einstein did induce some American Jews, who were not previously enamored of Zionism, to open their wallets, it did not happen according to Weizmann's greatest expectations. Big crowds did, indeed, appear to see Einstein and hear him speak. But it was mainly middle-class professionals, such as medical doctors, whom Einstein seemed to convert to Zionism. This did not translate into floodgates of money for either the movement generally or the Hebrew University.

Rosenkranz adroitly shows that Einstein's agreement to travel with Weizmann was largely a matter of timing and "semi-hidden agendas" on the part of Einstein's handlers (p. 134). Einstein himself had been trying to engineer a trip for fee-paying speaking engagements to the United States, which he bungled. He accepted the Zionists' offer for a mixed bag of reasons. Einstein did, however, broadly agree with their objectives. But he soon became embroiled in the heated conflict between Weizmann and Brandeis, to which he had been largely oblivious. This rift probably had a greater impact on Einstein's long-term disaffection with the movement than Rosenkranz realizes. Even though Einstein remained mainly in sympathy with Weizmann, being caught up in the raucous politics of the movement, upon his very entry, was an ominous foretaste. The author likewise shows that "Einstein's tour of Palestine in 1923" was excessively stage-managed, subject to a number of less than transparent objectives, with results that were not always clear-cut.

The part of the story of Einstein and Zionism that is best known, but little commented on, is the

great scientist's feelings about the movement's relations with the Arabs of Palestine. He could not warm to any political arrangement in which one national or religious group was privileged over any other. Rather than partition, he believed that the only permanent solution to the competing claims and ongoing hostility between Jews and Arabs was joint sovereignty in a binational state. But Einstein's stance was even more accommodationist than that of, say, Martin Buber or Henrietta Szold.

Although one of Einstein's political bedfellows as a signatory of the Brith Shalom plan was the American Judah Magnes, Einstein fought tooth-and-nail against Magnes's administration of the Hebrew University. The Zionists' aim of creating a Jewish university in Palestine was one of the movement's leading features for Einstein. He felt, though, that the project's implementation was "botched" from the beginning and by the early 1930, perhaps beyond repair (p. 181). He later referred to Hebrew University as "the 'bug-infested house'" (p. 230). Einstein contended that as long as Jewry, and especially its intellectual heavyweights, were overwhelmingly in the diaspora, the Zionists' university should be directed from an appropriate scholarly and scientific body based in Europe. He was especially troubled by two aspects of Magnes's stewardship. First, that Magnes was allowing donors to set academic priorities. The best course for a university to follow was not synonymous with the whims of donors for specific positions and units. But worse, Einstein believed, Magnes was too inclined to accept the fledgling university, as it was developing, as fait accompli—and the best course of action. Just because a Jew made the choice of immigrating to Palestine, and knew some Hebrew, did not mean that he deserved a place at the Hebrew University. If it was to be a research university on par with European, British, and American universities how could it operate in such an improvisational manner, devoid of standard peer-review practices? Did other universities take people on as faculty

members just because they happened to be there and spoke the language? Some of those who seemed to be gaining stature in Jerusalem were not even small fry, in Einstein's eyes. To put it succinctly: Magnes felt pressed to manage with the condition and individuals with which he found himself. Einstein insisted that this was not the way to create a world-class university. Einstein came close to totally abandoning the project, even to the point of supporting, instead, a Jewish university based in Kovno (Kaunas) (pp. 199-200).

This surely is the best book ever about Einstein and Zionism, and the most nuanced treatment of Einstein's Jewishness--some of which reveals his internalization of nasty prejudices--but there are some weak moments when the discussion ventures outside of biography per se. Rosenkranz does not fully appreciate how the history of the "undemanding" movement that preceded Einstein made it especially congenial to him (pp. 40-41, 57). The fact that Zionism embodied a vague set of myths and symbols, along with generally liberal, cooperativist, and progressive politics contributed heavily to Einstein's comfort in its fold. Einstein was perhaps most struck by the fact that Zionism was the first and only Jewish movement to enthusiastically embrace all Jews--particularly the downtrodden. That the movement specifically championed the plight of East European Jewry, the Ostjuden, was one of its main selling points to Einstein. In detailing the roles and view of Einstein himself the book is impeccable, but it is on less secure footing as a guide to Zionism's history more generally. Rosenkranz's portrayal of the incendiary Weizmann/Brandeis clash, for instance, relies on well-worn stereotypes rather than research or even close reading of secondary sources. Nevertheless, these reservations are minor in comparison with this book's outstanding achievement of narrating and analyzing Einstein's place in the history of Zionism.

For the most part--what a surprise--Einstein was right. Hebrew University is a good university,

but not among the world's most eminent, as was hoped, outside of explicitly Jewish fields. Israel's relations with its Arab population, obviously a matter of great complexity, continues to be a source of consternation to many of its own faithful and is not counted among the movement's success stories. If Israel is a beacon to other nations, it shines less brightly than many had hoped. If one wishes to excavate why this is so, this superb book on Einstein's deeply problematic relationship to Zionism is a fabulous source. Zionism was attractive to Einstein, above all, because it seemed to be a way for Jews to recognize and achieve "dignity" (p. 43). When the movement strayed from this ideal, toward "intolerance and small-mindedness" (p. 128), it disturbed him to no end.

Note

[1]. Quoted in Jeremy Bernstein, *Einstein* (New York: Viking, 1973), 214.

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