

## Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg: A Jew in America

Born in Poland in 1921, Rabbi Hertzberg came to the United States with his family in 1926. Morality, justice, and “defending the defenseless,” as he puts it, were part of his early training. In his memoir, *A Jew in America: My Life and a People’s Struggle for Identity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), he tells the story of his father, a Hasidic rabbi and scholar, who, in 1931, walked out on his Baltimore congregation with his arm around a visiting black Jewish rabbi, because the congregants objected to a black man leading the service.

Hertzberg later broke with the Hasidic orthodoxy of

his childhood, although not with the principles of justice and morality that he grew up with. He was ordained as an Orthodox rabbi, and is now Rabbi Emeritus in a Conservative New Jersey synagogue. In his long career, he taught Judaism courses at Columbia and Dartmouth Universities, wrote several books, served in many ecumenical groups, and was an official of major Jewish organizations.

Most notably, Hertzberg was the right-hand man for Nahum Goldmann, who struggled against the extremist Zionists here and in Israel. When Goldmann retired as head of the World Jewish Congress, Hertzberg was his chosen successor. But political maneuvers intervened, and Hertzberg instead became the vice president of the Congress, where he continued the policies that he and Goldmann shared.

—Marjorie Mazel Hecht

both sides sit down at the negotiating table and setting up two states; there has to be outside intervention. The United States must play a “decisive, but limited role,” Hertzberg says, in defusing the Mideast situation, but should not remain on the scene as an imperial “policeman.” This kind of imperial policy, epitomized by the rhetoric of Donald Rumsfeld and William Kristol, among others, will be disastrous everywhere in the world, he says, Real peace will only come in a few generations, once the Palestinians have been able to develop an economy and negotiate across the table with the Israelis on a more equal basis.

Hertzberg stresses that the current situation is urgent. His friends (unnamed, but judging from the circles he has moved in, they are top-level policy makers) tell him that soon the Palestinian extremists will make use of “dirty bombs,” using material stolen from Russia. (This is, of course, the same type of propaganda used here, in the U.S., to scare people into accepting police-state measures.) There is also the question of demographics, and the fact that if there is no “two-state” solution, Israelis will have an growing Arab population within the state of Israel, because of the higher Palestinian birth rate.

The right wing in Israel, and in the United States, would object to a two-state solution, Hertzberg says, “[b]ut an American government that would have the courage to force the end of settlement activity would find far greater support in the Jewish community both in Israel and in America than many of the people in Washington imagine.”

Rabbi Hertzberg has spent decades in the thick of the battle for Mideast peace, often on the outs with the Israeli government, because his judgments were always moral, and not made for political advantage or to “go with the flow,” in Israel or in the U.S. Thus, his analysis is that of a thoughtful insider, who personally knows the decision makers, and who

speaks his mind.

There are points on which I would argue with Rabbi Hertzberg’s analysis and omissions—for example, he does not mention the bloody role the British played in the first half of the 20th Century in setting the Arabs and Jews at each others’ throats, and their continuing promotion of terrorism. And, he does not elaborate on the necessity for economic and infrastructure development for the region.

More important, after reading this book, I was intrigued enough to read his autobiographical work, *A Jew in America* (see box), and I would advise readers to read this first. This memoir is a real treasure, giving an inside view of how Rabbi Hertzberg’s fine mind works, the thinking that guided him as he was growing up, and as an adult, his sense of humor, and his courage to uphold unpopular stands. Plus, for younger readers, it is a vivid picture of what life was like for Jewish immigrants in the first half of the 20th Century.

Having gained this appreciation of the man and what he has accomplished, I think that *The Fate of Zionism*, by itself, does not present an adequate view of his outlook and his ideas. Nevertheless, his message in *The Fate of Zionism* is rational, moral, and human. He has worked for peace for many decades, and he wants to solve the problem of bringing economic development and peace to both the the Arabs and the Jews. And this sanity is exactly why you don’t see him called on by the Administration as part of a “peace team”; or why he isn’t featured on the nightly news to counter the extremism of Ariel Sharon and his U.S. supporters.

Rabbi Hertzberg concludes by reiterating his call for secularism in the ecumenical spirit: “Let neither side keep invoking its supposed right to attack the other in the delusion that each is doing God’s work. Let them hear the deepest teaching of the Biblical faith that we are all God’s children. We are a family that must find ways of making peace.”