Prof. Juan Cole: Who are these Jews anyway?

Juan Cole is a history professor at the University of Michigan, specializing in the Islamic Middle East and South Asia. Since 1982, he has written or edited 15 books, and is a well-known left-liberal public intellectual, appearing frequently on television and radio – especially on PBS, CNN, MSNBC and NPR. He also runs his own blog, Informed Consent, and has written numerous newspaper op-eds.

A bona fide scholar on the Shi’ite and Ba’hai faiths, he sadly knows little about Jews and Judaism. A case in point is the acerbic tone deafness of his recent piece, “Recognizing Israel as a Jewish State is like saying the US is a White State,” originally from his blog and picked up by the left-wing site, Portside.

There is a legitimate debate among Israelis, Zionists and other friends of Israel – even on the pages of this website – as to whether the demand for the Palestinians to recognize Israel as a Jewish state is a good idea. Prof. Cole weighs in on this debate in the worst possible way, by caustically questioning what being Jewish means. Not that this isn’t a complex question worthy of serious examination and analysis, but the spirit of his article is entirely insensitive toward, and even unaware of, patterns of Jewish history and the range of meanings attached to Jewishness by actual Jews.

First of all, he completely misses the historical understanding shared by most Jews of ourselves as a people, apart from a religion. Even Orthodox Jews traditionally use the expression, Am Yisrael – the people or nation of Israel, i.e., the Jewish people. Reform Judaism was begun in the 19th century partially to narrowly redefine Jews as mere adherents of a religion, in order to help them integrate into the new nation-states where they resided – hopefully with the same rights (but often not) as other native nationals.
Moreover, Jewish Bundists, secularists and Zionists have all understood that one can be Jewish and not religious in any way.

If Cole had been examining this notion of Jewish peoplehood instead of polemicizing against Netanyahu, he might note the irony that Israel’s predominantly secular Jewish founders, for reasons of short-sighted political expediency, gave its then tiny ultra-Orthodox minority outsized power in defining who is considered a Jew and in not providing for civil marriage and divorce within Israel. Instead, Cole cites some rather dubious source to question the genetic origin of most Ashkenazim.

I’ve seen references to scientific sources that argue otherwise, but neither Cole nor I are qualified to pick and choose. If Cole were as knowledgeable of Jews as he apparently is of Muslims, he’d know that both Jewish communal laws & practices and Christian ruling authorities made it virtually impossible for Jews to marry non-Jews and remain Jewish. Also, we know that most linguistic scholars of Yiddish believe that Ashkenazim moved east from northern France and western Germany (usually migrating under duress), with little opportunity for genetic mixing with non-Jewish native populations – other than children born of rape by anti-Semitic attackers, a not infrequent occurrence during the Middle Ages and early post-medieval times.

Some Jews and Israelis argue reasonably, as does the writer Yossi Klein Halevi, that an explicit Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish state would communicate an element of acceptance that would encourage Israel to make the concrete territorial concessions it must to engender a Palestinian state. I agree, but I hate to see this as a sticking point that might prevent a final peace agreement.

In contrast to Cole’s tendentious assault on Jewish identity, I’m impressed by a completely different argument just made by Haaretz writer Chemi Shalev. He agrees with me and Klein Halevi in part:

I would be more than happy if Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas somehow succeeded in overcoming Palestinian objections and acceded to Netanyahu’s demand. Palestinian recognition of Israel as the state of the Jewish people would remove a serious obstacle to peace talks and may convince Israelis that Palestinian rejectionism has turned a historic corner. Such a move would also put immense pressure on Israel to be far more forthcoming in the concessions that it needs to make to reach a deal. . . .

But he also raises a complicated conceptual point that merits discussion:

. . . As long as there is a Jewish majority in Israel, I have no problem with its Jewish character or with its decision to grant
automatic citizenship to any Jew who wishes to make it their home. Ancient ties, millennia of devotion and 20th century horrors justify such a position.

If Netanyahu had demanded that Abbas recognize the historic links between Israel and the Jewish people or its centrality in Israeli life, I would be backing him all the way. But Netanyahu . . . wants him to accept that a Jew who lives in Buenos Aires has a weightier connection to Israel than the Palestinian family that has lived in Shfaram or in Tirah or in Taybe for hundreds of years. . . . [That’s] a bridge too far for me.

. . . One can be a Zionist and support Israel even if one lives in Timbuktu. But one cannot live in Timbuktu and claim Israel as one’s own. Abbas may choose to accept Netanyahu’s demand, but as far as I am concerned, Israel is an Israeli state, and it is the nation state of Jews who choose to live in it. Period.

And from what I know of Shalev, he also sees Israel as the state of its non-Jewish citizens. So he argues here against Lieberman’s proposal to trade away Palestinian-Israeli towns, because it treats “the citizenship of Israeli Arabs as second rate and expendable.”