

Israel's covenant

by [Darrell Jodock](#) in the [November 17, 1999](#) issue

*O Jerusalem! The Contested Future of the Jewish Covenant*, by Marc H. Ellis

Marc Ellis is a proponent of Jewish liberation theology. He is a critic of the national theology of Israel, which asserts that post-Holocaust Jews have a right to a homeland in Israel. Because that national theology ignores the Palestinians and has remained deaf to their suffering, it has become an ideology of oppression. "Most Jews take a collective pride in Israel; there is also a collective culpability. The return of the Jews to power has mostly been seen as a miracle in light of the Holocaust. Today it may also be recognized as a disaster." According to Ellis, for the sake both of the human dignity of the Palestinians and the moral integrity of the Jews, something new must replace that national theology. A new understanding of the covenant is needed, he argues.

Ellis, who teaches American and Jewish studies at Baylor University, wrote this book between the 1996 election of Benjamin Netanyahu and the 1998 Wye accords. The book's message transcends these events, but its references unavoidably reflect the atmosphere of that period. As Ellis looks ahead, he fears that Israel will pursue peace without revising either its view of the Palestinians or its picture of its own past. A lasting peace, he says, must be built on a deeper foundation of self-assessment and justice. He recommends that the Palestinians be included in the Jewish sense of covenant.

In part this is a political proposal, arguing that the truth about Israel's past needs to be acknowledged—the truth, for example, that in 1948 the Palestinian residents of the village of Deir Yassin were killed by the Irgun. In part it is an ethical proposal, arguing that peace is possible only if people cross boundaries and get to know "the other" as real human beings deserving of moral respect. In part it is a theological proposal, arguing that the covenant cannot endure if it is not revitalized by the inclusion of the Palestinians.

Ellis's multilayered discussion circles around a few basic points and must be assessed on at least three different levels. Many others have made much the same

political critique he offers. Recently within Israel itself, for example, considerable attention has been given to revising the long-accepted Israeli version of the struggle for independence. Despite controversy, even Israeli schoolbooks have been changed to acknowledge that Palestinians were in fact forced to leave their villages. They did not all leave—as Israel claimed for 50 years—merely because pamphlets from neighboring Arab countries urged them to do so and promised their speedy return. Those involved in revising Israel's understanding of its past share Ellis's belief that this is an important step on the way to a lasting peace.

Similarly, a variety of Jewish voices within the U.S. have challenged a narrow preoccupation with the Holocaust. They have questioned any view that neglects the rich resources of the Jewish tradition and constructs Jewish identity around only the Holocaust and Israel. (See, for example, Michael Goldberg's *Why Should Jews Survive? Looking Past the Holocaust Toward a Jewish Future*, Oxford University Press, 1995.) However radical Ellis's critique may once have sounded to Jewish ears, it is no longer so unusual.

The same can be said for Ellis's moral argument. Many others, including Abba Eban, have warned the Jewish community that Israel cannot have moral integrity until it stops making Palestinians second-class citizens. These voices have come not only from Israel but, especially since 1996, also from the American Jewish community.

On a theological level, Ellis frequently refers to the covenant, which "brings together ethics and justice, repentance and forgiveness." His book is a sustained plea for greater attention to "the covenantal grounding that lends depth to Jewish life." This is an important proposal, in part because it challenges both the usual tendency to invoke the covenant in order to undergird Jewish distinctiveness, and to separate Jewish theological deliberations from ethical-political discussions.

But though Ellis calls for a theological reconstruction, his book does not go very far toward developing or even outlining such a revised theology. The reader is unsure, for example, what is implied by his proposal to include Palestinians in the covenant. Is it akin to the post-Holocaust Jewish-Christian dialogue in the U.S., within which people find their own religious identity strengthened as they abandon a negative portrait of the other religion? Or does Ellis expect that including Palestinians will alter the distinctive, traditional identity of Jews and subsume it under a more inclusive pan-religious umbrella? One does not know what direction Ellis hopes the theological reconstruction will take.

Ellis is not optimistic that Jews either within or outside of Israel will reconsider the covenant, but he does see some signs of hope. He acknowledges that "there are Jews who have and continue to place ethics and morality at the center of Jewish life" and that "more and more Jews include Palestinians as part of their vision."

This book contains valuable insights into the responsibility of any powerful group toward a weaker one that it regards as an enemy. The issues Ellis discusses and the principles he formulates could inform our own need to come to terms, for example, with our mistreatment of Native Americans or our complicity in the oppression of Latin Americans.

But readers need to be cautious about the book jacket's claim that Ellis is "one of today's foremost Jewish theologians." My informal survey of congregational and academic rabbis revealed that many Jewish leaders regard him with indifference or suspicion. Although political and ethical proposals similar to his are being discussed, it is not clear that his is an influential voice in the debate. Because of the stridency with which he has criticized Israel in the past and the uncertainty about what he is proposing, he speaks for a small minority within a somewhat larger minority of Jews calling for a revised self-understanding of Israel's role.