
In *The Politicization of Israel Studies*, Miriam Shenkar sets out to trace the development of Israel Studies as an academic field and demonstrate why it is often difficult to study Israel as a normal country, that is, insulating teaching and research on Israel from contentious, real-world politics. She theorizes that faculty in Israel Studies have broken down into two camps, what she terms “prescriptive versus descriptive use of knowledge,” which she respectively associates with the social sciences and humanities. According to Shenkar, social scientists emphasize practical ways to improve political and social realities while scholars of humanities seek to understand facts and texts rather than affect political change. This divide is superimposed by Shenkar onto Israel Studies, where she contends that one view has emerged that promotes the idea that scholars and institutions should “teach the conflict,” while another holds that scholars and institutions should “teach the history.” Shenkar sets out to illustrate the process of normalizing the field of Israel Studies and fighting for academic legitimacy by showcasing these differing approaches in case studies of two public universities—Michigan State and Wisconsin—and two private universities—Columbia and NYU. In doing so, she demonstrates how institutional histories impact the approach taken by individuals and institutions.

Shenkar does a good job of outlining the close historical connection between Jewish Studies and Israel Studies, including the latter’s evolution from the former. She also painstakingly contextualizes the contemporary study of Israel in the academy by way of a thorough review of the emergence of the field through periods of changing priorities and interests. Israel Studies was born with a set of complex problems arising from Israel’s history being intertwined with Jewish history, and seeing as there is no consensus on whether Israeli history should begin with the founding of the state in 1948 or with prior decades of Zionist writing and settlement, the boundaries of Israel Studies remain fluid. Shenkar is at her best when relaying how Jewish scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ran into problems when their religious and communal affiliations were used to cast aspersions on their scholarly work, and how this dynamic continued in the latter half of the twentieth century when it came to studying Israel. In addition, Shenkar’s original research in the archives of the Association for Israel Studies (AIS) yields some intriguing revelations about the political nature of the AIS at its founding and its attempts to delegitimize competing organizations on political grounds.

Despite these high points, Shenkar’s book does not provide nearly enough evidence to back up its assertions. Indeed, Shenkar’s dichotomy of activist political scientists and objective truth-seeking historians is in many ways a caricature, and
one which she struggles to prove exists through reliance on tangential connections. To begin with, Shenkar’s description of social scientists as always looking to advance prescriptive solutions is inaccurate. The social scientist Charles Ragin famously defined the goals of comparative social science as explaining and interpreting macrosocial variation and interpreting significant historical outcomes. This is not to say that there are no social scientists who have a more prescriptive bent; there is a litany of political scientists who seek to use their research to influence policy outcomes. Making a blanket assertion that political scientists in the field of Israel Studies, or, more broadly, scholars who focus on the Arab-Israeli conflict are seeking to impose an activist solution on the parties involved is, however, an overreach.

Shenkar’s insistence on pursuing this Manichean duality collapses in her examination of individual cases as well. Yael Aranoff, who is the Israel Studies chair at Michigan State and the focus of one of Shenkar’s case studies, is described as a “political scientist activist,” and one who Shenkar claims has been influenced by Ian Lustick, a founding member of AIS who is characterized by Shenkar as betting his career on the ability to solve the quandary of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Given Lustick’s history of outspoken commentary on the harmful role of settlements and their status as an impediment to solving the conflict, it is unsurprising that Shenkar holds him up as the prototypical political scientist and attempts to tie Aranoff to him directly. Unfortunately for Shenkar’s argument, the only evidence she musters in this regard is the fact that Aranoff once cited Lustick in a 2009 article in *Israel Studies Forum*. Shenkar also highlights Aranoff’s research on peace negotiations put forward by hardline prime ministers and Aranoff’s inclusion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a topic in a course on international relations in order to prove her allegation that Aranoff’s true interest is in solving the Arab-Israeli conflict rather than simply teaching about it. The only actual proof that Shenkar musters in support of her theory about Aranoff’s motivations is that Aranoff gave an interview to the Michigan State student newspaper in January 2009 in which she expressed her hope that the peace process would be at the top of President-Elect Obama’s list of priorities. While this certainly shows that Aranoff holds a certain political point of view, it is hardly enough to establish a credible case for Aranoff as an activist.

When it comes to Shenkar’s other example of a political scientist activist, Nadav Shelef at the University of Wisconsin, her case is built upon an even shoddier base of facts. Despite noting that Shelef presents his scholarly work as a pragmatic social scientist and not an advocate, Shenkar does not believe this achievement of objective analysis to be possible, since Shelef has written on subjects such as settlements and the processes by which ideological change took place in the Labor Party. She seizes upon a student editorial complimenting Shelef’s treatment of the conflict during a public lecture but complaining that lectures such