

Gershom Gorenberg

Teacher, Where's the Border?

Jerusalem Report

November 11, 2005

The Jerusalem Report

Covering Israel, the Middle East & the Jewish World

<http://www.jrep.com/bin/en.jsp?enPage=ArticlePage&enDisplay=view&enDispWhat=object&enZone=Articles&enDispWho=Article^11297>

My daughter brought home a worksheet to show me from her high school class in Israeli geography. On it appeared a map, divided into geographic regions. The girls were asked to match the regions with their names - Negev, coastal plain, Samaria hills, and so forth. Naming the area covered by the full map would be more difficult. You could call it "Israel plus the occupied territories," but it also included the Gaza Strip, which may be surrounded and closed but isn't occupied any more. You could say "mandatory Palestine," but it also included the Golan Heights. The teacher, unperturbed, called it "the Land of Israel," as if that were simply a geographic term akin to "Asia Minor" or "Caribbean Sea" - as if he were not actually outlining the land under direct or indirect Israeli rule, at least until the disengagement.

What the map did not include was the Green Line - aka the pre-1967 armistice lines, aka the border between sovereign Israel and occupied territory. I could blame this omission on the fact that my daughter attends an Orthodox school, or that the teacher is a settler, but that would be unfair. His sketch matches the maps in the standard "Israeli Atlas for High Schools" ("approved by the Ministry of Education and Culture") and those produced by the Survey of Israel, a government agency, which still dominate the map market here. The detailed hiking maps published by that agency, for example, show not only developed trails, but also topographic lines, dirt roads, cliffs, minefields and army firing ranges - everything you could want to know to plan a safe day trip - except whether you will be crossing from Israel into the West Bank.

It would also be unfair to blame right-wing governments for this strange lacuna, and not just because the Survey of Israel is currently the bailiwick of Housing Minister Isaac Herzog, a Labor man. The Green Line went AWOL from Israeli maps 38 years ago, just a few months after the Six-Day War, when Levi Eshkol, head of the center-left Mapai party, was prime minister.

"The borders of the mandate and the armistice lines will no longer be printed," says a letter dated October 30, 1967, preserved in the office files of Yigal Allon, then minister of labor and a leader of the socialist Ahdut Ha'avodah party. From that moment, he ordered, only the June 1967 cease-fire lines would appear. At the time, Allon had responsibility for the government's map-making agency, which assiduously carried out his instructions. Since then, the maps have changed due to

various diplomatic agreements - most recently, the Oslo Accords. Areas A and B, theoretically under Palestinian rule, appear on the maps. The Green Line still doesn't.

To be sure, there was a rationale for Allon's move: Since the Six-Day War was a result of the Arab states violating their 1949 armistice agreements with Israel, so the Eshkol government argued, the armistice lines were a dead letter. But legally, militarily and administratively, the Green Line lived on. Truly erasing it, annexing the conquests of 1967, would not only have aroused international fury, it would have meant adding the Palestinian population to Israel's polity. In the next election, the leader of the largest party and presumptive prime minister could have come from Fatah.

So except in annexed East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, land beyond the line is under the legal status of "belligerent occupation," not Israeli sovereignty. A mix of pre-1967 and military law applies. The people who live there - except, of course, for settlers - remain disenfranchised. The settlements themselves - as the state again argued before the Supreme Court last spring, in defending disengagement - are legally temporary.

Though missing from maps, the border is ubiquitous in daily life. Government documents refer to Judea and Samaria, a region defined by the Green Line. Soldiers serve in "the territories." The media reports on "the territories." Even the settlers - perhaps they most of all - attach abiding importance to the absent boundary. The Council of Settlements, their public voice, clearly uses the unclear Green Line as its criteria for membership. Advocates of the Whole Land have appointed those who live in "Yesha" as the true idealists, the vanguard. Yesha, literally meaning "salvation," is the acronym for Judea, Samaria and Gaza, the land whose border would be drawn in green, were it only drawn.

Israel treats its border the way Victorians treated sex. The great fiction is that it does not exist. It shapes society, but portraying it is a sign of breaking conventions. Those who do so invite being seen as daring and not quite part of polite society. Bright children know it exists from adult conversations, know it will be terribly important when they come of age, and cannot quite imagine what it looks like. It is certainly not for classrooms.

As any responsible psychologist will tell you, young people need boundaries. Our youth apparently have to remind their elders of that. To my daughter and her friends, and anyone to whom they can zap an SMS or instant message, I offer simple advice. Ask, "Teacher, where's the border?" If he's a settler, and it's too frightening to ask him to draw the Green Line, try, "Where does Yesha start?" Say, "I'll be drafted in two years. Can you show us exactly where the territories are?" Ask every day. The grown-ups are hiding something very important. Demand to know.

Gershom Gorenberg is the author of "The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of the Settlements, 1967-1977," forthcoming from Times Books.

© The Jerusalem Report 1999 - 2004