The Return of Zionism: Myths, Politics and Scholarship in Israel

Lecture by Gabriel Piterberg

In this original and wide-ranging study, Gabriel Piterberg examines the ideology and literature behind the colonization of Palestine, from the late nineteenth century to the present. Exploring Zionism’s origins in Central-Eastern European nationalism and settler movements, he shows how its texts can be placed within a wider discourse of western colonization. Piterberg revisits the work of Theodor Herzl, Gershom Scholem, Anita Shapira and David Ben-Gurion, among other thinkers influential in the formation of the Zionist myth, to break open prevailing views of Zionism. He demonstrates that it was in fact unexceptional, expressing a consciousness and imagination typical of colonial settler movement. Shaped by European ideological currents and the realities of colonial life, Zionism constructed its own story as a unique and impregnable one, in the process excluding the voices of an indigenous people— the Palestinian Arabs.

“This thoroughly researched and engaging book provides an intellectual, cultural and literary fulcrum from which Zionist ideology and practice can be read afresh. ...This book is essential reading for everyone who is interested in the history of Zionism as well as the history of nationalist movements.” — Yehouda Shenhav, Professor of Sociology, Tel-Aviv University

Gabriel Piterberg teaches history at UCLA, and has taught at St Antony’s and Balliol Colleges, Oxford. His previous books include An Ottoman Tragedy: History and Historiography at Play. He writes for the New Left Review and the London Review of Books.

The discussion will be moderated by Prof. Marc Baer (ZMO).
The Returns of Zionism is a sharply critical intellectual and literary history of the Zionist movement and its principal progeny, the State of Israel. The book represents a milestone in the study of Zionism. Unlike the great majority of writers in this crowded field, Gabriel Piterberg is concerned both with the intentions of the Zionists and with their actual impact on the native population of Palestine. He breaks down the familiar mould and rearranges the pieces. Many of the Hebrew texts cited in this book are not available in English. The author uses the whole panoply of sources in all the Isaac La Peyrâre, a French Protestant of Sephardic ancestry and contemporary of Menasseh Ben Israel, publishes Du rappel des juifs which prophesises the conversion of the Jews, their return to Palestine and the beginning of the Messianic Age. 1649. Let me not be misunderstood: richly as the valleys wave with corn, and beautiful as is the general aspect of modern Palestine, vestiges of the ancient cultivation are everywhere visible proofs far more than sufficient that the land still enjoys her Sabbaths, and only waits the return of her banished children, and the application of industry commensurate with her agricultural capabilities, to. Politics in Israel is dominated by Zionist parties. They traditionally fall into three camps, the first two being the largest: Labor Zionism, Revisionist Zionism and Religious Zionism. There are also several non-Zionist Orthodox religious parties, non-Zionist secular left-wing groups as well as non-Zionist and anti-Zionist Israeli Arab parties. Golda Meir, Prime Minister of Israel from 1969 to 1974, once joked that “in Israel, there are 3 million prime ministers”. The particular version of