

Make Zionism Sexy Again



EZRA had a habit of irritating the rabbis of Plonsk, Ukraine. Founded by David Grün when he was only 14, the underground Zionist organization offered Hebrew lessons, fundraised for pogrom victims, and encouraged emigration to Palestine, much to the fury of local Jewish leaders.

In the early 1900s, Zionism was widely seen as an offense to God, so much so that Plonsk's rabbis forbade synagogue congregants from marrying into Zionist families. But Grün carried on, angering not only the rabbis but also the Jewish Labor Bund, a political party of fellow socialists—and staunch anti-Zionists. He was known for taking center stage at the Plonsk synagogue against a Bundist opponent, a spectacle so popular that the entire town flocked to see it. As Michael Bar-Zohar, one of Grün's biographers, writes:

The Bund emissary would appear at the Plonsk Synagogue, wearing a pistol and accompanied by two bodyguards. Opposite him, David Grün would get up on the stage. In a dramatic, tense atmosphere,

they would look at each other; silence filled the synagogue and the verbal duel would begin.

The constant conflict of ideology was essential in forming Grün's character. Nine years after starting his organization, he changed his surname to Ben-Gurion.

As the future prime minister of Israel battled with a Jewish world that was either vehemently opposed or reluctant to support him, Theodor Herzl was feverishly publishing utopian novels, organizing Zionist congresses, begging wealthy Jews for loans, and buckling under the feeling of imminent doom for his people. The skepticism of the Jewish community toward Zionism frustrated him. "If Jews are capable of accepting my efforts in such an undignified manner," he wrote in a letter, "then I regret (my) time, effort and sacrifice of all kinds."

Ben-Gurion would move to Palestine, survive a nearly deadly bout with malaria, lay the foundations of the Israeli economy, government, and military, carve out a Jewish state from the Ottoman Empire, and serve as its leader for decades. Herzl would die much sooner, having accomplished far less. But when declaring the Jewish people free and independent for the first time in 2,000 years, Ben-Gurion stood in front of an enormous—and now iconic—portrait of the melancholy Hungarian playwright who was known to erect a Christmas tree on his living room floor. These two men, young outcasts swimming upstream, saved the Jewish people.

Seventy-plus years later, the lie that "Zionism = Racism" has permeated left-wing politics, resulting in discrimination against Jews in institutions and harassment against us as we walk home from shul. The response to May 2021's fighting between Israel and Hamas demonstrated this clearly. Anti-Israel sentiment became

ubiquitous on social-media platforms frequented by the young. Groups of ostensible Jewish leaders (rabbinical students, academics) penned open letters unilaterally condemning Israel's actions. Jews were assaulted on the streets of New York, Los Angeles, and other cities in ways that European and Latin American Jews are all too familiar with. A widespread feeling of panic descended on our community: How could we possibly have gotten to this point? What on earth do we do next?

What's clear is something needs to change.

Instead of Jewish leaders asking themselves how to do more of what they're already doing—more Holocaust curricula, more Israel trips, more advocating for other groups' causes in the hope they'll advocate on behalf of ours—we need to be asking a different question: *What does the anti-Israel movement have that we don't?*

The answer is chutzpah. In Ben-Gurion and Herzl's day, Zionism was revolutionary, bold, rugged, scrappy, punk. Zionists were changing the status quo, upending existing structures, bringing a dream back to life after 2,000 years. And their work was physical: Work the land, drain the swamps, build up the state, defend it against attack.

Now Israel is established. It's the legacy organization of the anti-Zionist's start-up. The anthem for a Jewish state has turned from "work the land" to "guard the land," a notably less exciting motto. The Zionists are defensive, shooting arrows from a fortress, terrified the walls will be breached by ideas and policies that will imperil our safety.

Anti-Zionists, on the other hand, are progressing *toward* something, fighting for change, rebelling, sticking it to the establishment. I recently surprised a Chabad rabbi who asked me why young Jews were turning away from Israel with the response "because anti-Zionists are sexy," a riff off of novelist Dara Horn's term for them: "the cool Jews." It's true: Zionism has a bad case of unsexiness.

To a generation marinating in the juices of social justice, joining with the group that pitches itself as revolutionary is irresistible. The

In Ben-Gurion and Herzl's day, Zionism was revolutionary, bold, rugged, scrappy, punk. Zionists were changing the status quo, upending existing structures, bringing a dream back to life after 2,000 years.

anti-Zionist movement's strategy is to march alongside every trendy protest, whether the crowd is rallying for climate justice or defunding the police. After a while, the causes blend together. Everyone is marching for the same vague utopia. But in all cases, the existence of a Jewish state is apparently an affront.

In order to bring back the bravado of Golda Meir smoking dozens of cigarettes a day while plotting to take down the terrorists of Black September, I propose a revolution in American Jewish affairs: Let young people rebrand the spirit of Zionism.

A growing cohort of pro-Israel activists under 30 has been ringing alarm bells for years about the unique dangers of contemporary antisemitism on the Left. We're from the Left ourselves, and we've experienced this first hand in our high schools, universities, and activist circles. Every year we grow more vocal, more popular, more influential.

Think back to the days of the Zionist pioneers, before or after they were in the Yishuv: Jewish liberation has always been a young person's game, full of the intellectual, emotional, physical, and revolutionary fervor that young people crave. Ambitious thinkers meeting face to face to argue politics, drafting and reading manifestos and biographies, listening to speeches by academics and journalists, learning to speak and read Hebrew, organizing civil disobedience and marching in the streets, raising money for those

Instead of changing the image of the Jew, we are vocally rejecting calls for us to change, knowing all too well from history what happens when a new universalist ideology mandates that we check part of our identity at the door.

in need, and turning to Jewish ritual to replenish their souls. These are the elements of a vibrant movement into which we need to breathe new life.

The good news is that we've already started. Just in the last couple of years, promising organizations, activists, and influencers have emerged on campuses, schools, and social media. Jewish On Campus is documenting the stories of Jewish college students across the country and advocating against antisemitism on social media. Students Supporting Israel chapters are hosting important lectures and discussions with relevant thinkers in our community. Club Z is building a network of Zionist youth in attempt to revolutionize pro-Israel education. Noah Shufutinsky, also known as his stagename Westside Gravy, is a Black and Jewish rapper who sings songs of Jewish survival. Sabrina Miller is a young journalist in the United Kingdom who exposes anti-Jewish hypocrisy in academia. Ysabella Hazan is a student in law school who launched a line of clothing to inspire Jewish and Israeli pride. Jack Elbaum, Lewis Sorokin, and Josh Feldman have organized book clubs, fundraisers, and debates for young Jews to learn from. Chloe Santaub recently addressed an audience of European elites in Krakow on the threat of anti-Zionism on campus and beyond. There is clearly no dearth of talent or opportunity in the Jewish ecosystem.

We're engaged in a battle. We challenge assumptions and arguments against Israel in our circles. We point out hypocrisy, double standards, and the reinvention and revival of ancient antisemitic tropes. In a post-truth world, we're fighting for truth. In a society obsessed with the word "justice," we are insisting that Diaspora Jews and Israelis (Jews and Arabs alike) deserve justice as well.

My own organization, the New Zionist Congress, has been operating since March with online programming designed to empower the next generation of Zionist leaders. We plan to establish chapters in as many cities as possible in the United States and abroad, where young people can do what young people want to do: meet regularly to talk and debate. Was the arrest of Women of the Wall justified? Do Ethiopian Israelis have equal opportunity? Is Israel's Nation-State Bill discriminatory? Should we march on our state capitol to protest resolutions to boycott Israel? We are rekindling the energy of Ezra, restoring pride in Zionism. Giving young people opportunities to wrestle honestly with Israel's problems and complexities provides a more sustainable sense of strength than promoting false images of Israel's perfection.

Simply put: The face of the pro-Israel movement should be changed to one under 30, something the anti-Zionist movement figured out long ago. Give us the keys. We need funding, mentorship, and promotion. We already have the passion and drive we need to succeed.

None of this is unprecedented. The late 19th century witnessed what historian Jonathan Sarna calls a "Great Awakening," a spiritual and organizational revival driven primarily by young people who wanted to build a confident Jewish communal sentiment that could withstand both antisemitism and assimilation. They created the Young Men's Hebrew Association (1874), which launched the JCC movement; educational institutions such as the Jewish Theological

Seminary; media enterprises such as the newspaper *The American Hebrew* (1879); compendious works of scholarship such as the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901–06); and learned societies such as the American Jewish Historical Society (1892), the first ethnic cultural archive in the United States.

Another example: In 1964, Jacob Birnbaum founded Students Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ), 20 years before “Freedom Sunday” commenced in Washington, D.C. Most people who marched that cold December day in 1987, in step to Natan Sharansky’s booming call to “Let My People Go,” were probably unaware that it was a slogan crafted by Jewish students and teachers on campuses across the country decades earlier. As Amy Fedeski writes:

SSSJ was a small, poorly funded organization—but it had an enormous impact. It pioneered activism on behalf of Soviet Jewry; it made contact with activists across the world; it kept the issue on the international agenda for nearly thirty years. Whatever Soviet—or American—leaders thought about the Soviet Jewry Movement, they could not ignore it. Soviet Jewish migration soared in the 1970s; a change that could not have happened without years of patient, painstaking work by SSSJ.

As I write this, I’m looking at a black-and-white photograph of a young man involved in SSSJ, in his 20s as I am now, walking with a sign reading “I Am My Brother’s Keeper.” In his face I see much of Jewish history. Responsibility, rebelliousness—and youthful activism. The question remains: Can the American Jewish community re-create that sense of purpose? The early Zionists dreamed of “New Jews” who would refuse to live under the constraints that society imposed upon them, and who would actively build their own, free, independent future. Who will be today’s “New Jews”?

My own generation of “new-new Jews” is not here to discard history and tradition, but to put it to good use. Instead of changing the image of the Jew, we are vocally rejecting calls for us to change,

knowing all too well from history what happens when a new universalist ideology mandates that we check part of our identity at the door.

We need to reclaim not only words like “justice” and “progress,” but also the conviction that we, too, can define the “right side of history.” Young people have the chutzpah to believe that the world can change: That is what our ancestors have done, in so many ways, throughout our history. It would be a catastrophe to see their vision become vapid and their spirit static because Zionism had become establishment. There’s a new generation of young activists, often raised in and nourished by Jewish organizations of all kinds, who are ready to lead. What we need is the mentorship, the confidence, and the investment to do so. *