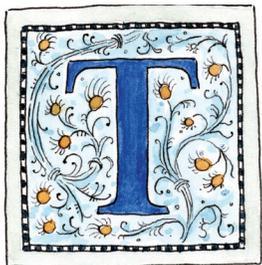


Judaism and Zionism Are Inseparable



THE JEWISH STORY begins in Genesis chapter 12:

And God said to Abram: "Go forth from your native land...to a land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation...and you shall be a blessing...and

all the families of the earth shall bless themselves through you." And Abram passed through the land...and God said, "I will assign this land to your offspring."

From this point forward, and forevermore, the Torah establishes two foundational principles of what became Judaism:

Nationhood and national territory.

Abraham was selected to found a nation, and like all other nations of antiquity, the Israelites required national territory—the Land of Israel—in which to fulfill their collective purpose. The entire remainder of *Tanakh*, at its most basic level, is about the unfolding destiny of the descendants of Abraham, defined first and

foremost in a manner that's physical rather than merely spiritual.

The nation, not the individual leader, covenanted with God: *I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. ... You shall be ... a holy nation* (Exodus 19:4–6). We never considered ourselves simply a religious community. A Jew is a member of the Jewish people.

Jewish particularism—the distinctive attachment and commitment to the Jewish people—is not an incidental component of Judaism, or a less-evolved, now irrelevant vestige of ancient days. It is its beating heart. Every biblical verse, every prophetic utterance, every Talmudic discussion, every halakhic ruling, every prayer, emerges from, and assumes fealty to, the centrality of *Am Yisrael*—the people of Israel.

That said, from the beginning, Jewish peoplehood was a blend of both particular and universal impulses: *I have grasped you by the hand... and appointed you a covenant people, a light of nations, opening eyes deprived of light* (Isaiah 42:6–7). Thus, God compelled a reluctant Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach the message of repentance and social repair. Our particular purpose was to represent universal moral values: *I have selected Abraham to do what is just and right* (Genesis 18:19). The urgency to do right compels Abraham to challenge God's intention to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Judaism absent Jewish peoplehood is not Judaism; it is something else. Whenever Jews abandoned their ideological—or practical—commitment to *Am Yisrael*, they eventually drifted away. This was precisely the accusation leveled by Reform Zionist Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver toward his anti-Zionist colleagues in the pre-war years. By continuing to insist that the Jews are “no longer a nation, but a religious community” (Pittsburgh Platform, 1885), Reform rabbis were, Silver contended, reconstituting “Paul's insistence upon a religious creed entirely divorced from nation and land.” In a scathing critique, he noted that this declaration of Reform rabbis “was the first of its kind ever made by an assembly of Jewish religious leaders,” implying that had the Reform movement continued down this path, we, too, like the early Christians, would have eventually drifted away from Jewish civilization.

These two foundational principles of Judaism—nationhood in the Land of Israel—accompanied us throughout the centuries of dispersion. Unlike every nation of antiquity that lived by our side, we did not disappear when our national sovereignty was dissolved. Miraculously and unprecedentedly, we learned to adapt and survive. But at no time was separation from the Land of Israel considered permanent. At no time did we abandon the dream of return. At no time did we consider dispersion to be a blessing. At no time did the rabbis sever Torah from Israel, or God from the people. At no time was *tikkun olam*—the universal demand to do what is just and right—ripped from the moorings of *klal yisrael*—the centrality of Jewish peoplehood. It was never one or the other. One without the other diminished both. It was all part of a unified whole. Loyalty to the Jewish people absent concern for all the families of the earth is a distortion of Judaism. And *tikkun olam* divorced from Jewish peoplehood is not Jewish universalism; it is just universalism. To contend that the Hebrew prophets cared only about repairing the world, and not about the well-being of the Jewish people as a people, is to misunderstand and disfigure the entire prophetic tradition.

A fundamental reason for the remarkable accomplishments of the Zionist movement that emerged at the end of the 19th century is that it did not invent a new philosophy of Judaism. Zionism sought to *restore* politically the essence of the Jewish spirit. Theodor Herzl wrote: “We are a people, one people. We shall live at last as free men on our own soil, and in our own homes, peacefully die. The world will be liberated by our freedom. Whatever we attempt for our own benefit will redound mightily and beneficially to the good of all mankind.”

Herzl, a prophet in every sense of the word (albeit a secular one, who probably knew more about Hegel than Hosea, John Stuart Mill than Jeremiah), was propelled into the pantheon of our people’s greatest and most influential figures because he understood or intuited our basic values and aspirations, incorporating them into a stunningly successful political plan.

Loyalty to the Jewish people absent concern for all the families of the earth is a distortion of Judaism. And *tikkun olam* divorced from Jewish peoplehood is not Jewish universalism; it is just universalism.

First, the centrality of the Jewish people: “We are a people, one people.”

Second, the yearning for territorial sovereignty like all other modern nations: “We shall live in freedom on our own soil.”

Third, the universal purpose of Jewish particularism: “Whatever we do will redound mightily and beneficially to the good of all mankind.”

Initially, most Jews were opposed to the Zionist platform. They thought Herzl delusional or mad. Such is the burden of all prophets. Orthodox Jews opposed Zionism because of their preexisting conviction that the dispersion was punishment for the sins of our people—exile—a condition that only God could lift, not human beings, especially not secular Jews such as Herzl and his colleagues. Anti-Zionist Orthodox Jews still reject Zionism for this reason. Reform Jews opposed Zionism because of their preexisting conviction that the Jews did not constitute a nation. Anti-Zionist progressive Jews still oppose Zionism for this reason—that Jewish nationalism suppresses, distorts, or perverts Jewish universal values.

But within a historical blink of an eye, most of the initial opposition from the Right and the Left dissolved, for the same reason—the increasingly intolerable antisemitism sweeping across Europe. Herzl had previously embraced the promise of European Enlightenment to solve the Jewish problem. He thought that the Age of Reason would finally eliminate Jew-hatred because, after all, antisemitism is irrational,

and its persistence contrary to Enlightenment values. But Herzl came to realize that even the Enlightenment would not cure Jew-hatred: “We have sincerely tried everywhere to merge with the national communities in which we live, seeking only to preserve the faith of our fathers. It is not permitted us. We shall not be left in peace.”

There is a kind of primal despair in these words. One can only imagine the internal conflict in the heart of this product of high European culture. In effect, Herzl concluded that Europe would never live up to its promises to the Jews, and therefore Jews had to abandon Europe. Integration is doomed to failure. There is something so unreasonable, so impenetrable, so deep about European antisemitism that it could not be reasoned with. A person cannot be reasoned out of something they have not reasoned themselves into in the first place. The only way to preserve Jewish life, Herzl thought, was for Jews to get out of the way. While no one could have anticipated the dimensions of the genocide of European Jewry in the decades to come, the early Zionists did intuit that Europe would become increasingly dangerous for Jews—not only physically but also spiritually. That is, the return of the Jews to Zion would not only save Jewish lives; it would liberate the Jewish spirit, unleashing our national creativity and reinvigorating our national energies. Herzl wrote: “Our enemies have made us one whether we will it or not. Affliction binds us together and thus, united, we suddenly discover our strengths.”

We have rediscovered our strengths since the convening of the First Zionist Congress in 1897. Many dreams were realized. Many remain unfulfilled. There is still much work to be done.

We should always distinguish between those who are critical of this or that Israeli policy and those who oppose the very existence of the Jewish state. To oppose a government policy, even vociferously, is consistent with the best of Jewish values. Our entire tradition is built on the premise of dispute, argumentation, debate, and controversy. Often, the most authentic, honest, and loyal act is to oppose prevailing opinion. Many critics of Israel are right to be critical. The unresolved Israeli–Palestinian

disputes create moral dilemmas that should trouble all of us deeply.

Even as Jewish anti-Zionism seems to be intensifying, in particular among the younger generations in America, anti-Zionist Jews constitute a small minority of our people. On the Right, this minority is composed largely of Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jews, whose lifestyles and values are outside the mainstream of world Jewry. On the Left, they are largely so-called progressive Jews, who, whether by word or deed, are regurgitating the old, discarded Classical Reform rejection of Jewish peoplehood. In truth, Jewish anti-Zionism is an anachronism. The majority of the world’s Jews already—or will soon—live in Israel. With every passing year, Israel becomes stronger, and its influence on world Jewry increases. Israel is here to stay. Anti-Zionism is a luxury of secure Jews, those who do not feel threatened by widespread Jew-hatred. It is hard to find any anti-Zionist Ukrainian Jews. To the contrary, Israel is preparing to absorb tens of thousands of immigrants from Russia and Ukraine in years to come.

“Zionism is the return to Judaism even before the return to the Land of Israel,” Herzl said to the delegates of the First Zionist Congress. It was an astonishing insight, a prophecy we now know to be true: By reviving the Jewish nation, Zionism revived Judaism itself. It is impossible to envision Judaism today without the State of Israel. Zionism restored the Jewish people to history, propelling us back to the future.

On my first glance at the Tel Aviv skyline in final descent above Ben Gurion Airport, the white city slowly emerging from the azure sea, I often recite to myself these words from Amos 9:14:

I will restore My people, Israel. They shall rebuild ruined cities and inhabit them. They shall plant vineyards and drink their wine. They shall till gardens and eat their fruits. And I will plant them on their own soil, nevermore to be uprooted from the soil I have given them.

Ruined cities are rebuilt, the people restored, nevermore to be uprooted from the soil of the Promised Land. *