

Reclaiming the Z-word



LONG BEFORE a New York Hebrew School teacher was fired for accusing Israel of egregious crimes and calling herself an anti-Zionist, I was obsessing about Jewish anti-Zionists. I find their attitude to Israel maddening—at best, ignorant and insensitive; at worst, pouring fuel on the antisemitic fire. I wrestle constantly with how to respond, not least because I run one of the country’s largest JCCs, in very liberal Palo Alto, California.

I’ve wanted to brand anti-Zionists as traitors, even “Un-Jews,” to borrow Natan Sharansky’s and Gil Troy’s term. I’ve flirted with ideological litmus tests to determine whether they are “us” or “them,” as Liel Leibovitz does. I’ve wondered whether we ought to exclude “them” from our institutions.

I’ve wanted to tout my moral clarity and challenge them: “Do you really believe every other state in the world is legitimate except

Israel? How is that not antisemitic?” I’ve wanted to denounce them as I imagine Matityahu the Maccabee denounced the Hellenist Jews of his day.

Part of me believes that if (when) the world comes after the Jews (again), the anti-Zionist Jews will have helped paved the way. We must not invite them into our Jewish spaces. We must turn off their microphone.

And then I remember: They’re Jews, and they are part of our family. They are our children and grandchildren, new generations, some on the path to Jewish leadership, some even becoming rabbis. Whether or not I consider them misguided, they ought always to have a place at our tables, a seat in our synagogues, a membership at our JCCs, and a passport waiting for them in the Jewish state.

We should be big enough to make space for them and confident enough to tell them why we think they’re wrong. If we don’t, this debate will proceed without us and without our views. They will not come into our spaces but create their own instead—and not invite us in.

In fact, that’s partly why this problem exists in the first place—why, that is, there are Jewish parents anguished to discover that their children don’t share their views about Israel, and children who believe they were “lied to” in their Israel education.

We have not engaged vigorously enough with Jewish anti-Zionists. But we should not be afraid to do so. We have always debated and disagreed with one another. The Jewish people have always been divided. Sadducees and Pharisees. Hasidim and Mitnagdim. The Irgun and the Haganah. Zionists and anti-Zionists. All members of our complicated tribe.

So how should we proceed? The Jewish way: from disagreement through debate to dialogue. Only by inviting them into conversation can we explore our views with them. I want to listen to their point of view—really listen—so they will listen to mine. Only if I’m in conversation with them can I say things like:

These 9 million people living in Israel—including 7 million Jews—they aren't going to disappear in your anti-Zionist future, right? So what happens to them? Did you know that 800,000 Jews who used to live in Arab countries were expelled by their governments after the 1948 war? Does that make you optimistic about a binational state? If not, it seems we are going to have to keep working at how to have a Zionist state. Doesn't it?

This may persuade some that they're not actually anti-Zionist—either because they're really just fierce critics of Israeli policy (as many Israelis are), or because they haven't thought through the ramifications of what it would mean for Israel to stop existing, or to stop existing as a Jewish state. Certainly, however, it won't persuade all. Nevertheless, it can open up the dialogue about Zionism so that what I regard as the critical discovery can be arrived at: Zionism today doesn't mean what it used to mean.

Some would abandon “Zionism” as too polarizing, but the word is too important to lose. Changing our own language to suit our critics is not the right answer—what other group is asked to do such a thing? Instead, we need to help people, including Jewish anti-Zionists, understand what Zionism has meant in the past, during the early days of Israel, and what it means today.

Before modern Israel existed, Zionism 1.0 stood for a set of questions. Should there be a Jewish state at all? What should it look like? Where, even, should it be? That debate has been settled. Resolved: We have a Jewish state in the Land of Israel, with equal rights for its non-Jewish citizens. *It's not going away.* A debate about whether Israel *should* exist is a waste of time. The anti-Zionists want to relitigate that—that's what the fight over the term really is. But Ben-Gurion declared Israeli independence on May 14, 1948, on territory voted by the UN to be the Jewish State of Israel—the legitimate legal successor to the British Mandate. Zionism 1.0 became history when Israel became a country.

And then Zionism 2.0 was born: shorthand for a debate over

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whether Diaspora Jews should be expected to support struggling Israel unequivocally—to have a stake without a say. The answer was *yes, but*: Diaspora criticism of Israel was limited to the extremes. Should it have been? That, too, is a moot question: As it was being debated, Israel became a self-sufficient, thriving country. Now we are living in a third era of Zionism, to go with the Third Jewish Commonwealth.

Welcome to Zionism 3.0. No more hand-wringing over whether Israel should exist and no more letting our enemies define the terms of the argument. Discussion of Israel must now be about what Zionism 3.0 should look like and how Diaspora Jews should be a part of it. Here is where I would start the conversation:

- Diaspora Jews should continue to make economic and philanthropic contributions to a robust, thriving Israel. But that doesn't mean being silent about Israeli politics. Instead, it means debating them within a framework that takes Israel's existence as axiomatic. No other religious or cultural diaspora ever questions the right of its homeland to exist.
- Diaspora critics of Israel should remember what Israel has done for its Diaspora. The number of Jews who remember the extraordinary upsurge of pride and self-confidence in being Jewish after the 1967 war is dwindling. They should be enlisted

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to remind their younger co-religionists of what being Jewish in America was like beforehand, and what, therefore, it might be like again in a world without Israel.

- It's a mature, two-way relationship now. Israel plays an enormously important role in Diaspora Jewish life beyond just being our security blanket. Israeli culture — science, literature, language, music, art, and food — enriches and strengthens Diaspora Jewish life and should be incorporated into tomorrow's Zionism.
- Some Diaspora Jews are uncomfortable with the influence of traditional and even ultra-traditional Judaism in Israel. But Tel Aviv is perhaps the only city in the entire Middle East where a progressive Jew can be comfortable, even an anti-Zionist one.
- And — bringing us back to where we started — Israel can help us engage the anti-Zionist Jews. Israel is ideally placed to provide Diaspora Jews with the perspectives — and, if they can be persuaded to visit, the experiences — that change the way people think. We should enlist Israel's help in engaging anti-Zionist Jews, not in one-off visits, but in the creation of mutually supportive relationships that last years beyond the moment the wheels leave Ben Gurion's tarmac.

Think of these points as the beginnings of a conversation you will continue. Teach these things to your children. Speak of them when you sit at home and when you walk abroad, when you lie down and when you rise up. If we can shed the out-of-date definitions of Zionism 1.0 and 2.0, we can take back the Z-word from those who have made it a dirty word — and perhaps bring them back, too. *