Zionism as a Core Religious Value

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Being a Zionist is as integral to the core concepts of Judaism, as keeping the laws of Shabbat, kashruth, fasting on Yom Kippur, or eating *matza* on Passover. It is intrinsic to our very identity as Jews. Three times a day, when we recite the *Amida*, we pray, “May You return to Jerusalem in compassion.” In that same passage of the *Amida*, it states, “May You rebuild Jerusalem speedily in our days.” And of course, within that same prayer we say, “May our eyes lift up and see Your return to Zion in compassion.”

Beyond that, every major event of our personal lives is imbued with our profound love of Zion. When we break a glass at our wedding ceremonies, we remember the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. At our moments of intense personal loss and grief, consolers pray that we “be comforted among the mourners of Jerusalem and Zion.” In the *Haggadah* of Passover, we say, “next year in Jerusalem.”

We see how in Judaism, the personal moments in our lives as individuals and our shared collective history merge. Almost anyone who is a caring and observant Jew has a special, regnant place in their heart for Zion and for Jerusalem.

The theological imperative to go to Israel, begins as far back as the second millennium bce, when Abraham in Genesis is told to leave his place of birth and go to the land that was to become the land of Israel. This land was promised by the Almighty to the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

But as strong as our religious roots are to Zion, Zionism also has been to us not only a theological issue, it has also been an ideological movement. It has been the cement that has glued our people together for centuries. Throughout the long suffering of our exile, it has been that 2,000-year-old deep yearning to live under our own sovereignty, under our own flag, with the ancient star of David at the center; with our own independent army to protect us; a place where even the most secular cab driver will greet you with “*Shabbat Shalom*” on Friday, and where the calendar in even the most secular schools is punctuated with Jewish holidays.

Our return to Zion, to the land of Israel, has been at the aspirational center of our very being—the hope that has sustained our people. In fact it is no coincidence that the name for the Jewish national anthem has been *HaTikvah* (literally, “The Hope”). This collective hope has sustained us

through centuries of marginalization, expulsions, Inquisitions, *dhimmi* laws, pogroms and ultimately the Holocaust—the most systematic attempted genocide of an entire people ever recorded in history. We have always yearned for the day that we would live under our own national sovereignty.

And finally, that hope has been realized. Israel not only exists, but has managed to thrive despite the many conflicts that have erupted throughout the years. It has become the greatest military superpower within the Middle East, and has one of the most rapidly growing economies in the world. Israel has made amazing advances in the fields of medicine, technology, agriculture, pharmacology, and more. Beyond that, Israel has been a beacon of aid to so many people in so many lands. If there is a hurricane, tsunami, or earthquake anywhere in the world, members of the IDF and Israeli doctors and nurses are likely to be among the first to arrive onto the scene with life-saving emergency care, directly on the field.

We Jews have a great deal to be proud of.

Yet, within a blink of an eye in historic terms, many Jews in the United States, seem to have forgotten our long history and the arduous path to finally achieving independent, Jewish statehood. And as the philosopher George Santayana had one said, "Those who have not studied history, are condemned to repeat its mistakes."

According to a survey by the American Jewish Committee on April 25, 2021, fully 46.5 percent, (nearly half of Jewish millennials) said that feeling a strong connection to the State of Israel was either "not too important" or "not important at all."

The Pew Poll released on May 21, 2021, indicated that

> Among U.S. Jews overall, 58 percent say they are very or somewhat emotionally attached to Israel, a sentiment held by majorities in all of the three largest U.S. Jewish denominations. However, Orthodox (82%) and Conservative (78%) Jewish adults are more likely than those who identify as Reform (58%) to feel this way. Conversely, among U.S. Jews who do not belong to any particular branch, a majority say that they feel not too or not at all attached to Israel. And while 60 percent of Jews overall say they have a lot or some in common with Jews in Israel, Orthodox Jews (91%) are more likely than Conservative Jews (77%), Reform Jews (61%) or those who don't identify with any branch (39%) to express this feeling.

We are seeing large numbers of Jews who are assimilating and intermarrying at a high rate. It seems like Reform Judaism has provided a convenient "exit pass" to so many Jews who have wanted to buy their ticket into the American dream. And within no more than a few generations, there has been a rapid atrophy of our core values that have defined us as Jews, including the 2,000-year-old a[1] ttachment to Zion.

Why has this happened?

To answer this, let's first examine the Reform movement and why it has been so seductive to so many of our people.

Looking at its historic roots, the Reform movement, which was born out of the Western Enlightenment in Germany, became embraced by thousands of European Jews. After so many centuries of deprivations, marginalization, pogroms, and expulsions, many early Reform thinkers saw universalism and human rights as the cardiac organ, pumping new life into an extremely remodeled belief system. They also substituted a love of Zionism with a love of the "fatherland," as they were desperate to disprove the charge of dual loyalty. Thousands of Jews enrolled in the Prussian army during the Napoleonic wars, and later the German army during World War I. These armies forbade Jewish participation for centuries, and now, with emancipation, droves of Jews enrolled in order to

prove their attachment to their host country. A quote by David Friedlander in the wonderful book by Amos Elon[2] of this period describes this brilliantly:

> [It is] a heavenly feeling to possess a fatherland! What rapture to be able to call a spot, a place, a nook one's own upon this lovely earth.... Hand in hand with your fellow soldiers you will complete the great task; they will not deny the title of brother for you will have earned it.

At a Reform Jewish Conference in Frankfurt in 1845, one of the speakers declared the erasure of the Jewish attachment to Zionism with these impassioned words:

> The hope for national restoration contradicts our feelings for the fatherland…. The wish to return to Palestine in order to create there a political empire is superfluous.... But Messianic hope, truly understood is religious.... This later religious hope can be renounced only by those who have a more sublime conception of Judaism, and who believe that the fulfillment of Judaism's mission is not dependent on the establishment of a Jewish state, but rather by the merging of Jewry into the political constellation of the fatherland. Only an enlightened conception of religion can replace a dull one.... This is the difference between strict Orthodoxy and Reform: Both approach Judaism from a religious standpoint: but while the former [Orthodox] aims at restoration of the old political order, the later [Reform] aims at the closest possible union with the political and national union of our times.[2]

As the philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard had said, “Life can only be understood backwards, but must be lived forwards.”

By the middle to the end of the nineteenth century, because of the continuation of acts of anti-Semitism and marginalization of the Jews in Germany, significant numbers of German Jews, mostly Reform, came to the United States, trying to accommodate Judaism to the mainstream values of American life. Among them was the first Reform rabbi, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, who cemented his strong stance of anti-Zionism, seeing Reform Judaism in America as a modern universal value, and stripping it of the particularism of Orthodoxy, including our age-old attachment to the land of Israel,

There was an enormous split within American Jewry before the first murmurings of the establishment of the State of Israel. Then, by 1944 and 1945, word had finally gotten out about the enormous horrors that had been inflicted by the Nazis on 6 million Jews of Europe. Thereafter, the overwhelming majority of Jews of all religious denominations in the United States finally embraced Zionism. However, there were still huge arguments between Rabbi Aba Hillel Silver who arduously argued in favor of the urgent establishment of a Jewish homeland, and Rabbi Stephen Wise, who favored a much more moderate approach.

Yet, there are still elements within the Jewish community that have reservations about Israel. Beyond the lingering pockets of anti-Zionism within the Reform movement, is the resentment within many non-Orthodox Jews for what they perceive as Orthodox domination of certain shared holy sites, such as the Western Wall. But more generally, many American Jews have embraced “politically correct” views that often are inimical to the Jewish State. For example, many are oblivious of the many offers various Israeli government have made to the Palestinians of “land for peace,” and how each time they were summarily rejected and greeted with more violence.

The hostile environment on many of America’s college campuses has taught many American Jewish students to simply “put their heads down” and “lay low” because there are so many bullies on

the left who shout them down, threaten them, expel them from positions within their universities because they are “Zionist racists” or even physically attack them. (There has proven to be minimal to no protection of the free speech of Jewish and Zionist students, under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, and when cases are brought to the attention of the Office of Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education, it takes months, if not years, for these cases to even be looked at.)

Several decades ago, the former Head of the Jewish Agency, Natan Sharansky, had called American Jewish university students, “the new Jews of silence.” Like a rock that has endured years and years of rainstorms and floods, this has made an indelible effect on the psyches of many of our Jewish university students. Many of these victims of anti-Semitism, who lack a basic education of what Israel has endured as a country are imbued with guilt and self-hatred.

Such is the case with Peter Beinart, a self-described Orthodox Jew whose anti-Israel screeds often make it into the pages of the *New York Times*. In an article entitled “Has the Fight against Anti-Semitism Lost Its Way,” he rails against, among other things, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism, which has been recognized by the U.S. State Department, 30 countries, the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE). Among examples of anti-Semitism, it includes the phrase “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor.”

Peter Beinart and other of his Jewish cohorts feel uncomfortable with that definition. They therefore have come up with a definition of their own, known, (rather ironically), as “The Jerusalem Definition of Anti-Semitism,” which declares that “Boycott, divestment and sanctions are commonplace, non-violent forms of political protest against states. In the Israeli case they are not, in and of themselves anti-Semitic.”

This comes at a very dangerous time for the Jewish State, when Iran has already amassed 25 kilograms of highly enriched uranium at the 90 percent level, (the level necessary for a nuclear bomb), and 60 kilograms at the 60 percent level which is an easy glide to the 90 percent level. We know that since June 6, 2022, Iran has expelled the International Atomic Energy Administration inspectors.

I am old enough to remember the huge groups of American Jews that gathered in demonstrations during the Six Day War, during the 1973 War, and even the thousands that gathered to protest the first JCPOA in 2015 on the streets of New York and Washington. Where are these Jews today? Many have embraced the “comfortable” and “politically correct” issues of the threat of global warming and of a denial of a woman’s right to choose, at a time when the lives of more than 9 million citizens of Israel, including 7 million Jews, hang in the balance.

The emancipation and rapid assimilation of Jews in this country has led to a constant and steady atrophy of the essential Jewish value of Zionism at a time of unprecedented danger for the Jewish State. As the American Jewish historian, Jacob Rader Marcus had warned: “A people that is not conscious of its past has no assurance of a future.” We need to understand our past and work courageously for a vibrant future.

1. Amos Elon, “*The Pity of It All ? A Portrait of the German-Jewish Epoch 1743–1933*, (Holt and Company, New York, 2002).
2. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, *The Jew in the Modern World*. (Oxford University Press, New York, 1995).