Reclaiming "Bible Zionism"

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What is Zionism after all?

The term seems to have originated in the 1890s by Nathan Birnbaum, founder of the Kadimah nationalist Jewish students' movement. Theodor Herzl popularized the term as the expression of the Jewish People's national aspiration to return to their historic homeland in Zion.

The term "Zionism" is often used by friends and enemies of Israel without proper reference to its historic roots in biblical times. Zionism didn't just pop up in a vacuum, as though it was a new and artificial framework for Jews to return to their land. Although the term as a political movement dates from the late 19th century, it in fact encapsulates thousands of years of Jewish attachment to their historic homeland.

Zion is mentioned over 150 times in the Hebrew bible. While originally referring to Mount Zion, it came to refer to Jerusalem and then to all the land of Israel.

Rabbi Dr. Henry Pereira Mendes, who was associated with the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York from 1877 to 1937, advocated what he called "Bible Zionism." He was proud of the fact that Theodor Herzl asked his cooperation in organizing the Zionist movement in the United States. Dr. Mendes was elected vice-president of the Federation of American Zionists and a member of the actions committee of the World Zionist Organization. He believed that Zionism had the goal of establishing a Jewish State founded upon the principles and ideals of the Jewish religious tradition. In a letter to Haham Gaster of London (July 21, 1903), Dr. Mendes wrote: Here is true work for Zionists: to keep Hebrews true to Jewish life, Jewish law, Jewish sentiment."

Dr. Mendes taught that "Bible Zionism" aspired to go beyond simply providing a homeland for Jews. It had a universal message and goal: "Peace for the world at last and the realization of reverence for God by all men. These are the essentials for human happiness. Zionism stands for them."

We rarely hear about "Bible Zionism" from Israeli political leaders, media, or the various Zionist organizations worldwide. But wouldn't it be nice if leaders and opinion makers reclaimed "Bible Zionism" and reminded the world at every opportunity of the biblical roots of Zionism?

“Bible Zionism,” as Rabbi Mendes pointed out, has a dual agenda. It stresses the national aspirations of the Jewish People to live in their own historic homeland and foster their religious and cultural traditions. The prophet Isaiah foresaw that Jews will “come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing will flee away” (Isaiah 35:10). He taught that “Zion will be redeemed with justice and those that return to her with righteousness” (1:27).

But “Bible Zionism” also points to the ultimate victory of justice and righteousness for Israel and the entire world. Isaiah taught that many people shall come to Zion “for out of Zion shall go forth Torah and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:3). Isaiah looked to the day when “the nations shall see your righteousness and all kings your glory” (62:1-2). The prophet Zechariah (8:3) taught that the Lord has returned to Zion and that “Jerusalem shall be called the city of truth and the mountain of the Lord of hosts the holy mountain.” Zion was to be a bastion of truth, justice and wisdom for the entire world.

Recent months have seen ugly manifestations of anti-Zionism throughout the world. The haters have distorted the meaning and mission of Zionism. We need to embrace “Bible Zionism” in every forum to set the record straight.

The Psalmist sang (122:6): “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; they who love you will prosper; peace be within your walls, prosperity within your palaces.” Just as those who love and support Zion will be blessed, the Psalmist warns (129:5): “May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned back.”

As for us, we must heed the words of Isaiah (62:1-2): “For the sake of Zion I will not hold my peace, and for the sake of Jerusalem I will not be still, until her righteousness goes forth like radiance and her salvation like a burning torch.”