

Do we still need Zionism?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There have always been nationalist movements in Judaism. Chanukah celebrates that of the Hasidim, or zealots, who fought to retain their Jewish identity. But most people don't think of the Maccabees as Hasidim nowadays. It has been purloined by a modern kind. What will we think of Zionism in two thousand years?

It is now regarded as unremarkable to claim to be anti-Zionist and not anti-Semitic. This is true of some Jews, as it is of some non-Jews. The result is that many manifestly anti-Semitic racists are sheltering under the banner of anti-Zionism. You even hear Arabs committed to Israel's destruction say that they cannot be anti-Semites because they are Semites too.

Zionism, of course, is just one manifestation, not the only one, of the Jewish people's desire to return to its historical roots. Something that is documented going back first to the Babylonian conquest of Judea in 586 BCE and then the Roman conquest of Israel in 70 CE, and that has been prayed about for three times a day for the last 2000 years.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, the land that many of them lived on was taken over by Byzantine Christianity, the Crusaders, and then Islam. Throughout this period, communities of Jews had continued to live in the land. Their numbers rose and fell according to economic and political circumstances. The desire to be there was expressed in poems reinforced by constant pilgrimage.

In the outside world at large, the urgency for freedom from oppression and discrimination grew. Jews did not conform to Christian, Muslim, Nationalist or Marxist ideals. They did not completely belong anywhere, despite the promises of assimilation. So it was inevitable that they would seek a national identity of their own. And why not, if others could? Theodor Herzl, who initially had thought Jews should assimilate, realized during the Dreyfus trial in France (which had been in the forefront of granting Jews rights) that a homeland was the only solution to the "Jewish problem", and that a political movement needed to be formed to achieve that end.

Zionism as a movement began in 1897. It was a phenomenon of 19th century nationalism. It succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of its founders, some of whom were happy to accept the offer of a Jewish homeland in Uganda! Naturally, they were outvoted. And if Zionism succeeded beyond the dreams of its founders, it succeeded largely because it compromised and took what was on offer under the UN Partition Plan of 1947, however inequitable it felt the offer to be. Something was better than nothing. And if the Arab world had not refused its part and had not attacked it, Israel could not have grown to the power state it is today.

But Zionism has always been controversial amongst Jews themselves.

Assimilated wealthy British, European and American Jews wanted to avoid being tarred with the brush of dual loyalties. Most Haredi Jews, the largest body of religious Jews nowadays around the world, never identified with Zionism. Even so, they were and are passionately committed to the Land of Israel and were in the forefront of migration long before Zionism. To pretend that there was no Jewish yearning for its homeland prior to Zionism is simply a lie.

But it is true that politics has always played its part, for better and for worse, in the creation of most states. and doubtless the interests of Imperialists and then the Holocaust did in the campaign for a Jewish homeland. Consider the break-up of the India Raj and the emergence of Pakistan. The cost in human life was enormous. The anger and the ramifications continue. Yet I have heard no one argue that Pakistan should be demolished. Why only Israel?

Israel and Zionism are faced with a tsunami of opposition. I think it's the only movement that is hated both by elements on the right and the left! To be fair, none of this really affects the reality on the ground or constitutes an existential threat to the Jewish homeland. But it is a challenge. Our children face significant discomfort and alienation at universities around the world because of it and it will only get worse. Israel needs to fight its opponents on the historical and intellectual battleground, as well as by military and technological defense.

Attacks on Israel come in two kinds. There are attacks against some of its policies, its corruption, its inequalities, and its xenophobia—things that any open society ought to welcome criticism over. There is much in Israeli society and policies that I dislike. But where don't I? But there are those who seek to destroy, to invalidate, and to deny Israel the existential right to exist. They call themselves anti-Zionists. We must resist such attempt at nationcide! But the fact is our arguments are having little effect.

I believe we should continue to argue our case. But there is another tool we could use that would help answer much of the opposition. Of course, as with all prejudice, there are those who cannot or will not listen. But that, I think, is their problem.

I want to suggest an option that I know will be rejected, if only because people are reluctant to give up on the familiar and their shibboleths. Besides, neither people nor companies nor countries like changing their assumptions unless forced to. Inertia is the natural state of institutions. **I want to suggest that we scrap the use of the word Zionism** and change the names of Zionist organizations, wherever they are. Zionism has fulfilled its aims. It has done its job magnificently. It should be retired. All its roles and functions can now be accomplished and supported by the Jewish people and those who wish to support them. Although I confess that I have been arguing this for over thirty years, for all the difference it has made!

Judaism existed for 1000 years before Christianity, 1500 before Islam, and nearly 2000 before Karl Marx. Judaism deserves its rights too. Zionism as a movement, on the other hand, was the creation of the late 19th century. Although some saw it as an attempt to replace Judaism as the expression of

Jewish identity, most saw it as simply a movement to fulfill the national aspirations and rights of the Jews—not to the exclusion of other rights, but as an expression of its own, of two thousands years of praying for it three times a day.

What is more, Israel was not established as a Jewish state. There is nothing about God, Torah, or religion in the Israeli Declaration of Independence. Most secular Ashkenazi Zionists did not want that. But things evolve. The refusal of the Arab and Muslim states to recognize Israel has forced Jews to wonder what the issue was. Was it one of politics or culture? As the Muslim world moved away from secularism back towards religious fundamentalism, the Jews in Israel did the same. Some to religious fundamentalism and others to political fundamentalism. The settler movement and the right wing under Menachem Begin, the first Israeli Prime Minister who was a practicing Jew and began to talk about Jewish values and Jewish history as a Jewish phenomenon rather than a Zionist one. That explains how a secular Jew like Netanyahu came to demand that Israel be regarded for the first time as a Jewish state, rather than as a state for Jews. No prime minister before him made such a demand. Israel was regarded as a secular state acting as a refuge for Jews. Indeed, the state definition of a Jew was not a Jewish one, but Hitler's.

In Israel itself the mood has shifted quite dramatically away from the old secular orthodoxies. Indeed, the new leader of the strongly secular left Labor Party, Avi Gabbay, has said the Israeli left has lost its Jewish identity. He has declared that he wants to be in favor and not against many of the causes and *bêtes noirs* of the old left, the party of Ben Gurion and Golda Meir. It looks as if he has struck a chord, and for the first time in years, his party looks as though it might come back.

Historically, the Zionist Movement, through the Jewish Agency, was an essential driver for independence. It was a government-in-waiting and should have been a model for Palestinian independence too. But once Israel was formed in 1948, it should have been scrapped. Sadly, no one wanted to fire anyone, and so it staggered on duplicating many government departments and responsibilities, wasting money. The justification was that Zionism and the Jewish Agency were needed to reinforce links with the Diaspora, as if Israel itself couldn't do it. Besides, it has manifestly failed!

The gap is widening as Diaspora models of Judaism try to interfere with Israel's internal affairs. The two Jewish worlds are polarizing and moving further away from each other. American Jews are increasingly alienated, while Israel is stronger and more important and has completely overshadowed it in every respect. Increasingly, it is the Orthodox Diaspora that is most pro-Israel.

Nowadays the only thing the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Movement do well is spend money on corrupt placeholders, jobs for favorites, and funding conferences. Its leaders are largely ignored. And the amount of money the Zionist Movement raises is miniscule compared to other sources. Israel is no longer a charity case. Besides, giving charity (it is called *Tsedakka*) will continue to be as important, as it has been as a Jewish value for thousands of years.

There are various kinds of Zionism that might object to my idea. Many secular Israelis do not want to be associated with Judaism as a religion. Zionism is their way out. Except of course many of them are now post- or post-post-Zionist and have rejected Zionism, themselves, as well as Judaism. I don't think that sliver of opinion is a significant enough reason to hold on to a redundant name.

The bigger group by far is the influential and growing Religious Zionist Movement. They might argue that as proud nationalists they need the term Zionism to distinguish themselves from the Haredi Jews who reject Zionism. But they call themselves "Dati Leumi", National Religious. They are Jews who are nationalists and don't need another epithet. Even if they do rely heavily on the ideology of the two Rav Kooks, they argued essentially for the sanctity of the land, not the terminology. Which is precisely what I am arguing for. We have a range of variations in Judaism, from secular to fundamentalist, who disagree about lots of things. But they only have one thing in common: being Jews.

Let Israel now simply accept that it is a Jewish democratic state, according equal rights to all its citizens, regardless of religion or race. Its credentials are excellent. All religions have had and enjoy free unfettered access to and control over their holy places. Unlike when Jordan conquered the old city and destroyed synagogues and forbade Jews to enter. There are, after all, Muslim and Christian and Buddhist states. Their records are not nearly as good as Israel's.

The Jewish world would be healthier, easier to defend, and probably more successful in presenting its case and highlighting the hypocrisies of many of its opponents if it just dropped Zionism into an honorable slot in our history and admit that it has now outlived its role. We are Jews. We have gone through a lot of names and sects over our 3000-year history. Time to let the term Zionism accept an honorable retirement.