

Proud to be a Zio

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I was once standing in line to board a plane at Stansted Airport, and I found myself next to a gentleman who appeared, to my trained eye, to be an Orthodox Jew—black suit, white shirt, no tie, black hat, and beard. I turned to him and said, lightheartedly, in a mixture of English and Yiddish, “With a ‘Shayna Yid’ like you on board, I am sure we will have safe flight.” For the uninitiated, this is a Yiddish expression for a “fine, upstanding Jew.” It’s a compliment.

He looked at me blankly, and I realized I had made a serious mistake. “What did you say?” he asked me. I replied that I had said that with such a fine, upstanding-looking gentleman like him on board, I was sure we’d have a safe flight. Don’t ask me why I said such a stupid thing. But I did.

“No that’s not what you said,” he replied and walked away. And that was the last I saw of him.

I realized that he had heard the word Yid and had thought I was insulting him. You see, in Yiddish “a Yid” is a compliment. It is a positive, good word. But in north London soccer circles, “Yid” is a term of abuse. Supporters of Arsenal and Chelsea use it against fans of Tottenham Hotspur, regardless of whether they are Jewish or not. This poor fellow, possibly an undertaker or a member of some honorable Order, took it as an insult. It is all about context.

The word “Goy” is now used almost universally in a derogatory way, even if in the Bible it is used entirely complementarily to describe any significant nation, primarily Israelite, but non-Israelite too. Where did its negative usage come from? According to Israeli academic Amnon Raz Krakotzkin, when the Catholic censors turned their attention to the Talmud, they went looking for anything that might be offensive to Christians. Talmudic terms for non-Jews like “Ovdei Kochavim” (idol worshippers) were intended originally to refer to real idolaters. But the censors thought it was a negative code for Christians, who had effigies of Jesus and Mary in their churches. So they insisted that the printers replace such terms with the word “Goy”, which at that time was regarded as a safe, positive biblical Hebrew word. But the fact that the Christians who were oppressing the Jews preferred this word inevitably turned it into a negative one. Amazing how one often does not see the consequences of one’s actions.

Now a new fashionable term of abuse, acceptable amongst the yahoos on the Left and Islamists, is that of Zio, intended to demean Zionists. In the discovery of rabid anti-Semitism in the British Labour Party, this term has suddenly come into the open. It is a soubriquet I am proud to adopt. If people use a term to disparage my inalienable rights, well, sod them, I say. In your face.

The strange truth is that in my youth I did not want to describe myself as a Zionist. My early experiences in Israel in the 1950s were of proudly secular Zionists who hated religion in general and Judaism in particular, who associated Orthodoxy with the ghettos of Europe and desperately wanted Israel to be Torah-free. This was a new phenomenon for me. I was brought up in England to respect religion, even if you chose not to keep it. The left-wing Zionism I encountered in Israel was rooted in the late 19th century, as a political movement whose dominant (not all of course) ideology was inspired mainly by Marxism. In my youth Marxism had already been revealed as "the god that died" or, more accurately, had betrayed all those millions of idealists who trusted in its healing powers—whereas I was brought up in Judaism, where Jews had been longing to return home and praying for Zion for thousands of years. Wanting to return home was Jewish liberation, self-determination. One did not need another word for it.

The Zionist myth that normalization would remove anti-Semitism was predicated on the belief that anti-Semitism was logical. That when faced with "normal" Jews the anti-Semites would see the error of their ways. But in the face of the blind hatred that refuses to go away, no evidence or argument can dissuade prejudice. I am hated for being a Jew regardless of whether I am a Zionist or not, and the current tsunami of anti-Israelism has drawn no distinction between Zionist and Jew. Meanwhile many secular Israelis feel more at home with like-minded international socialism than they do with Judaism. Which is fair enough, so long as I have the right to identify with those I prefer to.

I believed, and still do, that any "ism" that thought it could replace Judaism was doomed. So I did not want to describe myself as a Zionist. Yet I remained, and remain to this day, a firm believer in our need to try to take control of our own destiny (in so far as anyone can nowadays). One can describe that, if one wants to, as Jewish nationalism. But I could never see why, other than as a historical oddity, there was any value in calling it anything other than Judaism wanting its right to self-rule.

At the same time, I could see how all nationalism had and has a lot wrong with it. Most of it a relatively modern phenomenon that replaced the Holy Roman Empire, Austrian Hungarian Empire, The Ottomans and sundry others. In a dream world we would not need it. But given that nationalism is the current currency of world affairs and if the Serbs and Croats and Samoans and Irish can have their own country, it seems to me that only prejudice or visceral hatred could possibly object to Jews having a state of their own and the right to protect it. All the more so given that no other states were prepared to absorb them in any significant numbers when Hitler struck. And I accept fully that objectively my nationalism ought to be no less and no more important than anyone else's.

The attempt to differentiate between Jews, Orthodox or other, Zionist or not, is unhelpful and misleading. It provides work for bureaucrats and academics and excuses for Jew-haters. If you are walking in Jerusalem as a black suited-Charedi pacifist Jew who opposes Zionism as a secular distortion, you are just as likely to be stabbed to death as a soldier carrying a gun or to have abuse hurled at you by opponents of Israel's existence. Current

statistics show that Charedi men are far more likely to experience anti-Semitism in Europe and the USA than secular Zionists!

So, yes, I am going to call myself a Zio and be proud of it. Because if people hate me for who I am with no attempt at nuance or understanding, it makes no difference what they call me. So it's my way of saying "F***K you, too."