

Mai Tzionut? What is Zionism?
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One of my favorite jokes about Israel, so it bears repeating for those who haven't heard me tell it, has to do with the old *midrash* about the Temple in Jerusalem. The story goes like this: two brothers lived on opposite sides of a mountain. One was rich but alone, the other was poor but married with kids. Each loved the other so much, he would sneak extra grain from his store to support his brother. Each morning they would find their own stores undiminished due to the brothers' kindness. One night, as both brothers schlepped a sack of grain up his side of the mountain, they met on top. They recognized the other's generosity, dropped their burdens and embraced. It was on that exact site of brotherly love, the holy Temple would one day be built. The Israeli version, though, is the following: Two brothers lived on opposite sides of a mountain; these brothers utterly despised one another. Every night each would sneak to the other's home and steal grain from his store. One night they met on top of the mountain, saw the sacks of grain in each other's arms and realized why their grain stores were still full night after night despite their thievery. They dropped their burden and proceeded to strangle each other dead. And on that very spot, one day, the Knesset would be built.

It's a joke of course; intra-Jewish animosity is real, but thank God even where it exists, here and in Israel, it rarely approaches this level of vitriol. But the story points to a real truth: consensus (whether in or out of Knesset) is not a strong feature of Israeli society or Jewish culture. Neither, frankly has it been a feature of American society of late. Which is why, perhaps, it's so surprising that after yet another deeply contentious week in Washington, there emerged a small but significant bright spot from Congress having to do, not with the ACA, the border wall, North Korea, Russia or Refugees, but with Israel. This week saw all 100 US senators co-sign a letter to the Secretary-General of the United Nations. What did the senators say? They praised Antonio Guterres for disavowing the recent ESCWA anti-Israel report and encouraged him to do much more to change anti-Israel and often anti-Semitic culture and policies at the UN. 100 Senators. Unanimity. Almost unheard of.

This small bit of good news couldn't come at a more calendrically appropriate time since this coming week marks both *Yom Hazikaron*, Israel's Memorial Day, and *Yom Ha'atzmaut*, Israeli Independence Day. In just two days, on the 5th of Iyar, we celebrate that day in 1948, just months after Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state was affirmed on the 29th of November, 1947, by, of all entities, the United Nations. Israel turns 69 this week and in June we'll mark 50 years of Jewish access to the Old City of Jerusalem, our holy sites there, including *HaKotel HaMa'aravi* (the Western Wall).

The movement that led to *Medinat Yisrael*, is called Zionism, but these days that seems for many almost a dirty word. Not just in the UN, but around the world and in the US, including at times on college campuses, Israel is condemned as an apartheid state and Zionism is equated frequently with racism. Rather than respond to these and other spurious accusations today, I'd like to do something else. I want to explore with you a bit

the origins of Zionism. Who were some of the thought-leaders that shaped the movement and what were their ideas? In the Talmud, in *Masechet Shabbat*, confronted with a Babylonian Jewish community disconnected from the Palestinian story of Chanukah, the Sages pose a question: *Mai Chanukah?* Using the Aramaic term for “*ma/what*,” they ask “just what is Chanukah? Why is it important? What does this story from the land of Israel mean for us in the diaspora? Today, as we approach *Yom Ha’atzmaut*, I wish to pose a similar question: *Mai Tzionut*, what is Zionism?

As many of you know, while *hibat tzion*, the urge to return to our historic homeland, lives within the Jewish psyche and siddur for nearly two thousand years, the modern term Zionism describes a movement whose father and chief spokesman is Theodore Herzl. In point of fact, Leon Pinsker, founds his own movement, called *Hibat Tzion*, years before Nathan Birnbaum coins the term Zionism. Pinsker anonymously publishes a pamphlet, in German in 1882, called *Auto-Emancipation* which encourages European Jews to free themselves from the tyranny of anti-Semitism by rebuilding Jewish autonomy and sovereignty in *Eretz Yisrael*. Herzl, meanwhile, is a journalist in Paris during the Dreyfus Affair and witnesses pervasive anti-Semitism surrounding the trial. It’s possible this was the primary instigator of Herzl’s call for a *Judenstaat*. Or, as Prof. Shlomo Avineri has claimed, Herzl’s sense of urgency may stem from the general rise of nationalism and the 19th century spread of democracy which, in turn, gives rise to multiple nativist and anti-Semitic candidates across Europe. Suffice it to say, by 1896 Herzl publishes *The Jewish State* and in 1897 convenes the 1st Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, 120 years ago this coming August. The rest, as they say, is history.

Mai Tzionut? What is Zionism? For Herzl, a Jewish state is a solution to a problem, an answer to a persistently inscrutable question: namely the Jewish question. In romantic terms, Herzl outlines a utopian vision in which Palestine become a fully modern European state, part of the family of nations. Herzl understands the Jewish people have always identified as a nation. Their problem, he surmises, is they aren’t organized as such. Normalcy is Herzl’s aim: a Jewish state which is seen as just another state. As author Yossi Klein-Halevi has put it, “Perhaps only Jews could conceive of a normal national life in messianic terms” (*Like Dreamers*).

So, if for Herzl, Zionism is an attempt to end Anti-Semitism by normalizing Jewish identity with a nationalist solution, this is somewhat different from David Ben Gurion’s Zionism a generation later. Ben Gurion nuances the message: yes, Israel will end anti-Semitism, not by normalizing Jews per se, but by normalizing Jewish power. Dr. Micah Goodman argues this ironically puts Ben Gurion and Bibi Netanyahu in a similar camp. It is Jewish strength made manifest through Jewish military might that will end Anti-Semitism by vanquishing the Anti-Semites, by pounding them into submission so that they have no choice but to respect us as much as they do themselves.

But a decidedly different approach to the Zionist idea comes from revisionist Ze’ev Jabotinsky and finds its expression a half century later in the person and at least some policies of Menachem Begin. Jabotinsky is sanguine not just about Jewish strength, conviction and identity, but about other peoples as well – most pointedly Arabs. Zionism isn’t about Jewish acceptance, says Jabotinsky. No charm offensive will win the day.

Neither will military strength win any hearts and minds, let alone respect. He's no warmonger and no chauvinist, but he detests Jewish weakness. The 1903 Kishnev Pogrom and the 1920 Arab Revolt are just the beginning, he believes. "If the wolf has to lie down with the lamb," says Jabotinsky, "I want to be the wolf." According to Dr. Goodman, with whom I'm studying at the Shalom Hartman Institute and with whose help I am refining my own understanding of Jewish statehood, whereas Herzl is interested in restoring peace, Jabotinsky is interested in restoring Jewish pride. Jabotinsky, like Pinsker, understands Anti-Semitism as a disease of the mind. Normalization won't cure it. And you can't bomb it out of people. Ultimately, I think he is saying we are not responsible for other people's biases or shortcomings. We can only be our best selves. Anti-Semitism does have one singular benefit though: Jabotinsky says it will motivate more Jews to move to Palestine.

Jabotinsky is a pragmatist: he's utterly convicted the Jewish people, like the German people, the French people or the people who would one day call themselves Palestinians Arabs, are interested first and foremost in self-determination. Where Begin is primarily concerned with armed resistance, Jabotinsky is obsessed with diplomacy. And unlike Netanyahu's race-baiting and segregationist policies, Jabotinsky wants full citizenship and true equal rights for all, regardless of beliefs. A litmus test of ideology for visiting Israel, as many right-wing Israeli politicians support – let alone citizenship – would have been anathema to Jabotinsky. He feels the best course of action is a strong Israel, governed by a liberal democracy, with a sizable Jewish majority, brought about through mass immigration. Unfortunately the Holocaust upends his plans. Aliyah is stymied both by the British mandate's immigration policies and later by the sheer magnitude of the genocide.

Mai Tzionut? What is Zionism? It is about safety and security; it's a place at the table and a prayer for peace of mind. Many other thinkers affect the profile and character of Zionism and therefore the state of Israel itself. Herzl understands the existential threat to Jews, but not the existential threat to Judaism. This is the essential role Ahad Ha'am plays as he champions a Jewish cultural renaissance. "Herzl," says Goodman, "solves [for] the problem of Jewish sovereignty. Ahad Ha'am, solves [for] Jewish identity." The list goes on: Micha Josef Berdyczewski who argues Zionism's purpose shouldn't be to save Jews from persecution a la Herzl nor to save Judaism a la Ahad Ha'am, but to save Jews from themselves, to transform the Jewish character from, in his view, passive to active, from weak to strong. Yosef Hayim Brenner feels it's the religious aspects of Judaism that encumber the Jew and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook argues it is the Jewish soul, spirit and person, living religiously in its land that is redemptive.

My point is that Zionism, like Judaism, has never been about consensus nor even consistency, which Emerson called "the hobgoblin of little minds." It should be said, though on this Shabbat marking Israel's birthday that Israel and Zionism have been and continue to be aspirational, a product of the Jewish mind and therefore, part of the inheritance of the Jewish people. We owe it to ourselves to better understand the State of Israel, its history, its people, and its ideas. The musical Hamilton has been a raging success because it has made American history accessible at a time when much of the political energy seems to scoff at historicity and demonstrable facts. You well know

there are forces at play, here, in Israel, in France and around the world. These forces seduce us into believing that fake is worth considering, that fact is subjective, that power gives moral license to those who wield it over those who don't. Zionism is a word and like many words means many things. *Mai Tzionut?* What is Zionism? As the rabbis say, *tze u'lemad*, go and learn, because if we don't, we relinquish definitional control to the likes of the UN Human Rights Council which, the letter signed by all 100 US senators reminds us, "maintains a permanent item on its agenda – Agenda Item VII" – to assess Israel even as numerous other countries, including some represented on the Council, commit egregious human rights abuses against their citizens on a daily basis."

To conclude: two, not so shameless, Israel-related plugs. **First**, we have a wonderful group of families traveling to Israel next June, including three families bringing three generations. We have our schedule, a terrific itinerary and a number of exciting events planned together in the coming months. We have room for a few more families. So if you are a parent, or a grandparent, and you want to come with me to Israel in 2018, call me this week, and we'll discuss details. **Second** plug: on May 10, we have a program with Hopkins political scientist Dr. Robert O. Freedman on shifting US policy toward Israel and the Middle-East. It should be great. Please come!

Chag Sameach! Happy Israel Independence Day!