

Power, Jews, and “Settler Colonialism”

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It was Inauguration Day for America's first Jewish president.

In the first row, sits the President-Elect's mother. She taps the person sitting next to her on the shoulder.

"You see that man up there?" she asks him.

"Why yes, Ma'am, of course I do," her neighbor responds.

"His brother is a *doctor!*"

You may think this is a joke about Jewish mothers, but I think it's a joke about power. We Jews have some ambivalence about the notion of Jews holding and wielding power. Rabbinic colleague and Jewish Studies professor Shaul Magid published a book this past year titled *The Necessity of Exile*, the upshot of which is a celebration of diasporic Judaism and deep discomfort with the existence of a Jewish state. Magid's critique comes from his own rejection of an Orthodox religious nationalism he once embraced and especially the toxic and violent worldview of Meir Kahane and now Itamar Ben Gvir.

Let's hope all of us are repulsed by this thuggish brand of Jewish power. I've been to Hebron. I've seen the adornment of mass murderer Baruch Goldstein's grave. If you are not concerned about the potential corrupting effects of ethno-nationalism, including Zionism, I would submit you are not paying close enough attention. But the abuse of an idea doesn't make it a bad idea. And Zionism was not only a good idea; it is simply a recent iteration of a very old one. Zionism was the nineteenth century framework through which Jews worked for the establishment of a nation state within our ancestral homeland. The fulfillment of *hibat tzion*, that ancient yearning for Zion, marked a return to Jewish sovereignty and, yes, power over our destiny. This is a good thing and on this Day of Atonement, not something we need to apologize for.

But today I want to talk not about the corruption of Zionism, but the abuse, misappropriation, and weaponization of a different idea, a framework that describes the rapacious conquest and exploitation of foreign lands by European empires. The popular critique of this idea called settler colonialism is not without some merit. Although imperial conquest of certain humans by other humans is as old as human civilization itself, these conquests invariably bring great harm to the conquered, subjugated, or expelled. This is why we Jews still mourn our own conquest, expulsion and exploitation by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and the Romans in the year 70.

In 1947, after centuries of yearning and pilgrimage, half a century of advocacy, and two years after the annihilation of more than one-third of our people, the international community saw fit to re-establish a national Jewish presence within the former colony of Palestine. Why was the British Mandate called Palestine? That was the name the territory had carried in some form since the Romans overcame the Bar Kokhba Revolt in 135 and, hoping to erase Jewish national identification with the land, rebranded their protectorate Syria-Palaestina. That name was borrowed from the Greek relating to the Philistines, a sea-peoples who invaded Canaan from the Aegean and settled along the coast in, more or less, what's now Gaza. So, in 1948, in plain terms,

the Jewish people were given an international mandate to return home. If that's the case, why is it that on social media, in college encampments, in the hallowed halls of the United Nations, we the Jewish people are being called settler colonialists?

First, a brief definition: Britannica defines Western colonialism as "a political-economic phenomenon whereby various European nations explored, conquered, settled, and exploited large areas of the world." In his new book *On Settler Colonialism*, journalist Adam Kirsch explains: "Modern Jewish settlement in what is now Israel began at the same time that European powers like Britain, France, and Germany began the 'scramble for Africa,' But where those empires divided up a continent into huge colonies in order to exploit their people and resources, Jews went to Palestine in small volunteer groups, aiming to create self-sufficient agricultural communities.... From the 1880's to the present day, the main driver of large-scale Jewish emigration to Israel has not been economic ambition but political persecution" (pp. 88-89).

In other words, Jews returned to our ancient homeland, not to conquer it but to seek shelter from the vagaries of an inhospitable world. Then, why are Israelis (and those who love and support them) being accused of settler colonialism? Because as much as we Jews might be ambivalent about Jewish power, guess who's not? Antisemites.

Here are two questions I submit are important for us to have clear answers for, or at least for us to be searching for answers for: First, how can we honor our ambivalence about power in ways that help us wield it with justice, fairness, and compassion? Second, how do we resist that little voice in the back of our heads that says we can't handle it? Or worse, that we don't deserve it?

I've spoken previously about that first question and my fear that Kahanism or less virulent strains of Jewish supremacy, will occupy increasing market share in more Israeli minds, deeds and policies. The fact of the matter is that there is another people who have lived on that land for a very long time. They deserve peace and thriving in the short term and a just, lasting solution for their own national aspirations. My own view is this should take the form of a Palestinian State. But I am also concerned about that second question, that the pernicious story others like to tell about us will supplant the story we Jews have always told about ourselves, that we'll internalize the hatred so very many seem obsessed with directing our way. That's what's so tragic about a group like Jewish Voice for Peace at Michigan whose Instagram story two weeks ago was removed by Meta because it read "*'death to Israel' is not just a threat, it is a moral imperative and the only acceptable solution. may the entire colony burn to the ground for good.*" Antizionism is not de facto antisemitism, but it is possible for Jews to promulgate antisemitism. Hating Israel doesn't make you a self-hating Jew, but hate speech is hate speech no matter its origins.

Haters tend to see the world in black in white, in absolutes, don't they? How sad and unimaginative: this confusion between virtuous moral clarity and the vice of moral certainty. Maura Finkelstein, a former professor at Muhlenberg wrote this on social media recently in defense of her justification of Hamas violence and trolling of Zionist students: "You either stand with oppressed people and fight for justice and liberation or you align yourself with power & fight in the service of white supremacy and fascism."

Why this false choice? We Jews have too frequently been the victims of other people's dogma, haven't we? Rabbi David Wolpe, emeritus from LA's Sinai Temple and also Harvard, puts it this way: "Antisemitism is protean. Whatever you hate, you can transfer to the Jew. Today colonial-settlerism is the evil of choice, so Jews are colonial settlers. Nazism is a perennial hatred, so Jews are Nazis. If you hate communism, Jews are communists, if you hate Capitalism, Jews are capitalists. You can hate Jews because they are weak and stateless or because they are strong and ethno-nationalists. Because they wear 'regular clothes' and blend in or because they wear long black coats and side-curls and refuse to assimilate. Because they are subhuman (the Nazis called them 'vermin') and because they are superhumans who control the world. Because they are resolutely secular or stubbornly religious. Because they went like lambs to the slaughter or because they fight too vigorously. The image of the Jew shapeshifts as a dark psychic threat in the hater's mind. The one thing the antisemite is sure of, however, whether marching at a Klan rally or just hanging out on campus: there is a good reason. They would NEVER hate Jews just because they are Jews."

Falsely accusing Israelis of settler colonialism is but one excuse to hate on Jews without the stain of antisemitism, but you might wonder what exactly this has to do with Jews and power? Harvard law professor Noah Feldman, who unlike Finkelstein, has expertise in religion and Near-East studies, suggests it has a lot to do with Christian supersessionism. "Paul's theology," he writes, "was read to depict the Jews as having been replaced or superseded as God's special favorites by the community of Christian believers. By failing to become Christians, Jews implicitly challenged the narrative of inevitable Christian triumph" ("The New Antisemitism," *Time*, Feb. 2024). This is why medieval Christian art so often depicts Ecclesia triumphant over Synagoga, the church dominating and chastening the submissive Jew.

Echoes of this worldview have unfortunately metastasized in other cultural and most recently geo-political contexts. Take Franz Fanon, twentieth century French Afro-Caribbean thinker whose writing has done more than perhaps any other to inspire contemporary anti-colonialist resistance groups – including terrorist organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah. Fanon viewed the indigenous colonized as immutably tied to a particular land, conveniently ignoring the fact of human conquest, displacement and crossbreeding. "Decolonization... implies the urgent need to thoroughly challenge the colonial situation," he writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*. (pg. 2-3). "Its definition can, if we want to describe it accurately, be summed up in the well-known words 'the last shall be first.'"

Where do these "well-known words" come from? Matthew 20:16. "So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen." Who is chosen, according to Matthew? Well, not us. At least not anymore. Those who interpret the gospel through the lens of replacement theology find justification in the very next chapter: "Therefore I tell you the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits" (21:43). The verse caps a parable about recalcitrant tenants (Jews) who are ultimately evicted from their land by the landowner (God). And the verse used against the Jewish people over centuries to justify brutalizing or evicting us in the name of God is (cruelly) our own, from Psalms, from Hallel in fact: "*Even ma'asu habonim, heitah l'rosh pinah*, the stone that the builders rejected has become the capstone."

Fanon is not writing about Jews in *The Wretched of the Earth*. He uses the Biblical analogy instead to speak of the colonized overcoming their colonialist oppressors. “For the last can only be first only after a murderous and decisive confrontation..., can only succeed by resorting to every means, including of course violence.” Whether Fanon himself would have supported Hamas’ bloody campaign of terror one year ago I cannot say. But Hamas and other terror groups borrow this violent Fanonian rhetoric in their propaganda all the time. And when Hamas apologists shout “globalize the intifada” or “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” (the Arabic version is, “Palestine will be Arab,” but that doesn’t rhyme in English) they are furthering a toxic and dangerous house of cards, each canard and mischaracterization of Jews stacked precariously one on top of the other. “...Because people’s ideas about Israel typically draw on older, pre-Israel ideas about Jews,” says Feldman, “criticism of Israel can borrow, often unconsciously, from older antisemitic myths.”

Is Zionism about the colonization and genocide of an indigenous people? It is not. But it could have been, at least the colonization part. The first night of Rosh Hashanah, I told you about the remarkable Abayudaya, the Jewish people of Uganda with whom we spent two weeks this past summer. The Abayudaya are indigenous to East Africa, having converted *en masse* in 1919. But you may know that in the previous decade a portion of Uganda was offered by the British to Theodore Herzl at the 6th Zionist Congress in 1903. Why that year? This was the year of the Kishinev Pogrom when the world was stunned by the rape of more than 600 Jewish women and barbaric slaughter of 49 Jews in the Russian Empire. The event bridged two infamous antisemitic fabrications: the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, crafted by the Czars and widely distributed by Jew-haters in the years that followed Kishinev – and the blood libel, invented in 12th century England, and the spurious justification for the 1903 pogrom. As Steven J. Zipperstein writes in *Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History*, “From its start their attack on Jews was justified as self-defense, a reasonable response to a pariah people, capable of any and all transgressions.”

Later that year in Basel, Switzerland, Herzl and the early Zionists had to contend with a tender from British colonial secretary Joseph Chamberlain (yes, he was called colonial secretary because the British were colonizers of indigenous African land). Jews had been tortured, violated and slaughtered. Should they accept Uganda, even as a temporary refuge? The initial vote was yes, but in the end they declined. And that’s a very good thing. You know why? Because a Jewish state in East Africa settled by outsiders from Europe, North Africa and Asia, on Massai Land, in a place that would not for 16 more years have an indigenous Jewish population – well there’s a name for that, isn’t there?

Instead of colonizing East Africa, we Jews decided to fight for our ancestral homeland, the place from which we were violently dispersed 2,000 years ago, the place toward which we pray three times a day, the place whose ancient placenames populate our most sacred texts. Given this history, it’s hard not to conclude that fundamentally there is one reason Oct. 7 emboldened so very many people to vilify our people. Because beneath all the accusations, lurking behind all the insinuations, is the fundamental belief that we Jews, who as much as any and more than most peoples on earth, can justify our need for power – we alone are undeserving of it. Undeserving of power and undeserving of Palestine.

Very soon, in the Musaf Amidah, we'll intone an ancient formulation: *mipnei chata'einu galinu meartzeinu*, "because of our sins we were exiled from our land." But that's not the end of our story. The prayer continues: "May it be Your will Hashem our God... who restores your descendants to their promised land... Gather our dispersed people from among the nations and bring back those scattered to the ends of the earth." Yossi Klein Halevi, author and my teacher from the Hartman Institute suggests there is a new leftist version of supersessionism. Instead of *galinu me'artzeinu*, because of our sins we were (temporarily) exiled from our land, these claims of settler colonialism, of genocide and apartheid – these become excuses to banish us permanently, not just from our land, but from our very story. *Mipnei chata'einu galinu misipureinu*, "for our sins we no longer deserve our story," he says these new supersessionists are claiming, which includes the land for which we've yearned all these centuries. Post Oct. 7, says Yossi, we have forfeited even our claim on the Shoah. We're no longer worthy of that story, so goes the perverse argument, because we hide behind that story to perpetrate another holocaust.

But here's the thing: we're not going to surrender our story. Jewish resilience, forged in the fires of expulsions and pogroms, is not so fragile. Today is Yom Kippur, a day of making amends. And God knows we individually have much to be sorry for this year, for all kinds of things having nothing to do with Israel/Palestine. And this extremist Israeli government has much to be sorry for, for the ways it failed to protect its citizens one year ago, and much more. And the IDF has made egregious errors – like the killing of World Central Kitchen workers and tacit (and sometime active) endorsement of unprovoked and brutal violence by West Bank settlers against civilian Palestinian populations in the occupied territories – violence celebrated by some in the current ruling coalition.

But Yom Kippur also demands we distinguish between those mistakes for which we must be accountable and those things for which we owe no one an apology. We should not be sorry for the State of Israel. We should not be sorry for Jewish sovereignty. We might be sad for the necessity of Jewish military might, but we need not be sorry. And we should definitely not be sorry for our story: a story that saw our God invite Abraham and Sarah to immigrate to Canaan, that saw our ancestors thrive and build a civilization in that land well over three thousand years ago, that in the past 76 years has seen our people create poetry, industry, culture, environmental technologies, music, yeshivot, and pretty decent craft beer.

We have to be clear about our apologies because we have to be clear about our past. The inimitable Oprah Winfrey says the best definition of forgiveness she ever heard was, "giving up the hope that the past could be any different." So, given that we cannot remake the past, what should we do? Kirsch, in his book *On Settler Colonialism* says, "We can't revoke the past and its barbarisms, but it is very much in our power to express our hatred of the past by inflicting new barbarisms. In North America, calls for decolonization cannot restore lost languages and civilizations, or make hundreds of millions of [quote unquote] 'settlers' disappear, or uninvent the technology that made hunter-gatherer societies obsolete... In Israel, the language of settler colonialism falsifies history in order to dehumanize Israeli Jews and celebrate their deaths. The Hamas attacks of October 7 were a document of barbarism, if anything ever was; yet to the ideology of settler colonialism they were praiseworthy, because they were seen as an attempt to rectify historical injustice" (pp. 105-106).

We might ask, whatever happened to pragmatism? To solving problems? Because the contortions of a settler colonialism worldview rob both Israelis and Palestinians of a deserved and better future. “The hope that Israel will prove to be a short-lived aberration,” writes Kirsch, “a historical curiosity like the Crusader kingdoms of the Middle Ages, condemns the Palestinians to political limbo, the Jews to aggressive hypervigilance, and both to dreams of a final solution in which the enemy simply disappears. Insofar as the ideology of settler colonialism nourishes such dreams,” he says, “it helps to ensure a worse future for everyone living “between the river and the sea” (p. 98).

[P]ower, lodged as it must be in human hands, will ever be liable to abuse,” said James Madison in 1829. Avoiding that abuse is tricky – for Jews, for everyone. But the Psalmist reminds us *A’nai oz l’amo yiten*, yes, “God gives strength to our people.” Strength, power, is given, it is a necessity, but it is not an end in and of itself. It is not the goal. It is not even a blessing. The blessing comes in the second half of the verse: *A’ni yevarech et amo vashalom*, “God blesses our people with peace.” May we be forgiven for all that we have done wrong. May we distinguish between those sins and our questions about power. May this year be a sweeter one. May our hostages come home. May the fighting abate. May Palestinians rebuild and begin to recover. May peace prevail.