

## **What is Zionism?**

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Do you remember those homework assignments many of us used to get at the beginning of a new school year? “Write down, in one paragraph, what you did on your summer vacation.”

If I had to answer that question, “What did I do on my summer vacation?” I’d have to say, “I talked with Israelis!” The reason I talked with so many Israelis is that my family and I traveled this summer. Not to Tel Aviv, but to the Canadian Rockies! Nonetheless, at least once or twice each day, sometimes at the remotest sites, we ran into Israelis. And we had some interesting, enlightening conversations.

At one point, we were shmoozing with several Israeli adults who had made the typical Israeli travel arrangements: since they were going to be attending a family wedding in New York, they figured that, on the way from Tel Aviv, they’d stop in Houston, Texas; Las Vegas, Nevada; and Banff National Park in Canada. Why not?! At one point in our conversation, which was in the middle of a food court in a mall in Banff, one of them turned to me and pointed to my sweatshirt.

I happened to be wearing one with some Hebrew as well as English writing on its logo. She pointed to the Hebrew writing and said, “Aren’t you afraid to be wearing that here?”

I was dumbfounded. All sorts of confusing thoughts came into my head. No, I wasn’t afraid to be wearing that sweatshirt, but clearly, this other person with whom I was speaking thought I should be! And yet, this person was an Israeli, living in the free Jewish nation where, as we know, all Jews are courageous and can be expected to be walk proudly wherever they go. You might think that an



American would be afraid, but an Israeli you'd expect to be brave, and even cavalier!

I thought back and remembered that, yes, the previous day we had seen some suspiciously anti-Jewish or anti-Israel graffiti in Jasper. But to be afraid? Why?

We spoke further, about the matzav, the situation; how, since the previous Rosh HaShanah, the start of the latest Palestinian rebellion, Israel had been plagued by terrorism. We spoke about the fear people felt going about their daily lives, and about how Israel and Israelis had begun to feel increasingly isolated in the world.

Oy! It wasn't supposed to turn out this way! What a reversal of the Zionist dream. The Zionist dream was supposed to take a people who had long been persecuted and maligned, and create a refuge, a safe haven to guard and protect them. It was supposed to be safer than the diaspora which had been so cruel to Jews for so long. The irony is that today we live in a world in which Jews who live in many diaspora communities such as the United States feel safer and more secure than Jews in Israel.

Not only are the Jews in Israel terrorized, they are maligned as well. It was Ben Gurion, that founding father and master architect of the State of Israel, who had a famous saying that was very encouraging during the many years during which he fought to establish the State of Israel. These were years of opposition to Jewish national aspirations, years of condemnation from the world. "It doesn't matter," he used to say, "what the gentiles say. What matters is what the Jews do." In other words, Jews should ignore the criticism, the often patronizing and condescending discouragement of the leaders of the world who were not supportive; Jews should instead focus on taking care of their needs and building a Jewish state.

Such a stance is harder to maintain in the wake of the disgraceful hate-fest – I'm not sure what else to call it – that took place recently in Durban, South Africa. Representatives of human rights groups, of non-governmental organizations, of nations from across the globe, joined in an extraordinarily disturbing orgy of condemnation of our people, our faith, and our national aspirations. Many of us are too young to remember the hate-filled climate in Europe that preceded World War II, and certainly too young to remember pogroms in Russia. I certainly can't remember hearing such vitriol from such otherwise well-meaning, committed

people. Who could be against human rights? The answer is, any of us, after witnessing what took place in Durban just two weeks ago. To spend time trying to get everyone to agree that Zionism is racism, instead of addressing the serious, real issues of discrimination and religious, ethic and racial persecution today is inexplicable, horrifying and shameful.

What's so disturbing and frightening about this is that, in the words of an Israeli official who attended the conference, we Jews know that the road from hate-speech to murderous genocide, from Nuremberg to Bergen-Belsen, is shorter than we think.

But let's step back from focusing on others and their unwarranted criticisms, and focus instead on ourselves and our goals. If Zionism isn't racism, then what is it? What is its purpose? Does it still deserve our support?

Two years ago I gave a course on the future of Zionism. I became aware that, though many people remember Golda Meir, Moshe Dayan and other well-known Zionist leaders, the theoretical foundation of Zionism was unclear to many people. This is not surprising. After all, Zionism is over a hundred years old; it is a national liberation movement that arose in a very different world: Europe at the end of the 19th century. It behooves us to study the history of Zionism, to try to understand why and how it became the movement that brought us the State of Israel. Particularly in a world in which it is still so maliciously maligned, we, as Jews, should know what it is all about.

As a start, I would like to share with you today three answers to the question, "What is Zionism?" Answers which I believe will show that the principles and the ideology of Zionism still have something to say to us, even today.

What is Zionism? First of all, Zionism was an effort to change the objects of history into subjects of history, an effort to change a fundamental, painful reality that had been responsible for two thousand years of Jewish suffering. For all that time, we lived at the mercy of others. We were homeless, stateless, and defenseless. To a certain extent, the history of that period is the story of how others acted on us or towards us, not the story of how we helped shape events.

Zionism was one of several responses to the so-called Jewish Question -- the question of how to address our powerlessness, our vulnerability. It was not the only one. I had a friend in high school, whose father had been a leader in the Jewish Socialist Labor Party, the Bund, in Warsaw before World War II. The Bund was founded in 1897, the same year as the First Zionist Congress. At one time, it boasted tens of thousands of members. It too stood for Jewish rights and Jewish self-defense. But rather than calling for an independent state, the Bund stood for the promotion of Jewish rights within the nations in which Jews already were living, particularly Poland, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. My friend's father remembered the days when hundreds of thousands of Jews attended Bund demonstrations in support of Jewish rights in Warsaw.

The Zionists believed that such efforts were futile, that eventually the Jews in Europe would lose those rights that the Bundists were struggling valiantly to achieve, and that the only way to provide the Jewish People with sufficient security to allow us to play our rightful role in history was to establish our own nation on our own soil, in what was then Palestine.

My friend's father never became a card-carrying Zionist. But after living through the Holocaust, he never again had quite the same enthusiasm for a solution to the Jewish Question that did not include the establishment of sovereignty in an independent nation. Can we blame him?

Second, Zionism sought to establish a state not only to provide an opportunity for Jews to govern themselves and to run their own affairs, but also to develop their own culture and language. It is not a coincidence that my friend's father, the Bundist, never valued Hebrew very much. He was a Yiddishist. Yiddish, of course, is as Jewish a language as Hebrew, but it is the language of a diaspora community. Hebrew, which the Zionists urged Jews to speak, and which they fought hard to establish as the new vernacular of the Jewish People, was the exclusively Jewish language that arose in the Jewish homeland. Hebrew is the language of the Bible, the siddur (the prayerbook), Jewish classical texts and treatises. Zionists preached “shlilat ha-golah,” the “negation of diaspora,” and strived to purify Jews and Judaism from diaspora passivity and degradation. They believed that only in a Jewish commonwealth could Jews choose a Jewish national language and could

our culture truly flourish. Thus, Europe could never be for them the place for Jews to nurture the Jewish spirit, even if they did feel at home.

Finally, when all is said and done, Zionism is our return to our roots. Of course it won out over Bundism.

How could it be otherwise? “Lech l’cha” – “Go forth,” God tells Abraham, “to a land that I will show you.” That land wasn’t Europe, it wasn’t Spain, it wasn’t even America. Yes, we Jews have lived in all those places, but they have been way stations on a very long road. The land of our national destiny is described in a book that is almost three thousand years old, a book from which we read this morning. The two thousand years from 70 C.E., when the Romans conquered Judea and began our dispersion, to 1948, when the State of Israel was established, is just a “shetzef ketzef,” a “blink of an eye,” in Jewish history, from the perspective of the Jewish spirit. We are back in the land of Israel because, in the words of Israel’s Declaration of Independence, it is the land where the Jewish people arose, the land of the prophets, the land of our destiny.

But what about the reality? The reality is tough. Conditions are not ideal.

Aviva Zornberg is a brilliant, articulate Bible commentator and teacher living in Jerusalem. She teaches at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, where many American Jewish students go for a year after college. In her book *Genesis, the Beginning of Desire*, she comments on a curious juxtaposition in the Biblical text: Immediately after the portion we read this morning, the story of the Binding of Isaac, known in Hebrew as the “Akeidah,” the text tells us that Sarah dies. The rabbis were puzzled by this: Why would the text tell us that Sarah dies immediately after this story? It must be that they are connected. Aviva Zornberg shares three classic midrashim that seek to explain this puzzle.

The first midrash tells us that when Sarah woke up that morning, the morning that Abraham left to sacrifice his son, she didn’t know where they had gone. Satan appeared to her and told her, “Your husband has taken your son up the mountain to sacrifice him!” And she promptly drops dead from the shock.

In a second midrash, Satan tells her that Abraham took Isaac up the mountain and then lies, telling her that he has slaughtered him, whereupon Sarah dies of grief.

In a third midrash, Satan comes to Sarah and tells her the truth: that Abraham took Isaac up the mountain and at the last minute his life was spared. And yet, according to this midrash, she dies anyway.

Aviva Zornberg asks: Why? Why, according to the third midrash, does she die if she's been told the truth, namely, that her son will soon be on his way home? She should be rejoicing if she realizes she has just been spared from tragedy! Why does she die? Professor Zornberg's answer is instructive: Sarah dies because she cannot bear living in a world where life hangs by a thread.

Aviva Zornberg understands this. She lives in Jerusalem. You send your kids to school in the morning and you pray they will come back. You hear about a pizza restaurant exploding and you wonder: did your child, did your spouse, did your best friend decide to go out to lunch today?

That poem by Yehuda Amichai that we read yesterday, "The Diameter of the Bomb, was written about the challenge of living in Israel. And the Land of Israel is very small, as Amichai tells us in another one of his poems. One's enemy, rather than being on the other side of the world, lives right next door.

This is enormously challenging. This is a challenge Israel faces each and every day.

The days when the lion will lay down with the lamb – they haven't arrived yet.

Israel today doesn't resemble Disneyland, a place to which we can travel and leave our troubles behind. Israel deserves our support and commitment because she is the expression of our people's hopes and dreams. She sprang from our history and she is the fulfillment of our destiny. The question we should be asking, each day and every day, is "How can we help?" Let's do just that.