

The “Z” Word

Every year on my birthday I take a few minutes and do something that is a little bit morbid. I do a search on the web for famous people who died at the age I just turned. I admit it’s a strange ritual. But every year I am amazed at some of these personalities and what they accomplished in a relatively short period of time. When I turned 36, I realized I was the same age as the “King of Reggae,” and my favorite musician, Bob Marley. I remember being astonished four years ago when I found out I had just turned John Lennon’s age. That year I pledged to learn a Beatles song or two on my ukulele. (Still working on that!)

I once again took part in my annual birthday ritual this past July as I turned 44 and the one famous person who shocked me the most: Theodor Herzl. In most pictures of Herzl, he looks like a much older man with his long and bushy greying beard. I never once thought I could be his age. After my astonishment wore off, a bit of depression settled in as it does nearly every time I do this query. I thought to myself, *Herzl is the father of modern Zionism. What have I accomplished in the same lifespan?!?*

Over the next several days, I could not get Herzl’s image out of my head. I just couldn’t shake it. This ended up being a blessing, however, because it got me thinking quite a bit about my own relationship with Zionism.

This word, Zionism, has become such a loaded and divisive word in recent years that it often feels like a curse word. The second you say it aloud, if you’re daring enough, there is a good chance others around you will get riled up make some knee-jerk comment. Maybe some present are squirming in their chairs just a bit. For many young American’s especially, Jewish or not, the “Z” word equates to European colonialism, the oppression of innocent and indigenous peoples, or just something unethical. You would not be hard-pressed to find articles arguing how Zionism is a racist movement. In the highly polarized world we live in, nuance is hard to come by and having discussions about this idea of Jewish self-determination will likely land you in a hot mess.

This morning I want to talk about Zionism and hopefully reclaim this word for good. And if I can avoid finding myself in a hot mess, even better.

Where do we begin?

It would seem that any discussion of Zionism ought to start with “my twin,” Herzl. After all, Herzl’s contribution to this movement over the course of his adult life is immeasurable. Simply put, he recognized a pressing need at the end of the 19th century when he realized that Jews were never going to be safe unless they had a land of their own and the ability to determine their own destiny. For Herzl, Jewish self-determination was the only solution to the growing problem of anti-Semitism. And it was really bad at the time. However, Herzl didn’t originate this idea. In fact, the idea of Jewish sovereignty in our homeland, *Eretz Yisrael*, is a foundational tenet of Judaism that goes all the way back to biblical times, so any conversation has to begin much earlier than Herzl.

I’d like to start at the year 70 CE. That’s right, nearly 2000 years ago. This was the year that the Romans, under General Titus, destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem and initiated what has come to be known as the Diaspora. Ever since this traumatic event when our ancestors were massacred and brutally kicked out of their own sovereign land, we have been praying for our return. Even today, 73 years following the birth of the State of Israel, we continue to recite the psalms that our ancestors who, not ever knowing if they would ever set foot in their homeland again, chanted with passion. Each year at the very end of our Passover seders we still say, “Next year in Jerusalem.” Returning to the Promised Land is central to the spirit of Judaism. This yearning can not be separated out from our spiritual and religious life.

As a result of the widespread Diaspora, the Jewish connection to *Eretz Yisrael* spans nearly every continent, encompassing Yemenite, Moroccan, Ethiopian, Russian, Spanish, Asian, and Mexican Jews, to name a few. No matter where Jews have lived or under what conditions, for the past 2000 years all of us have been praying for a return to Zion.

I am in awe of this 2000 year old dream. Our Jewish ancestors never gave up hope of returning home and writing our own history. Think about the fortitude they had to muster. Think about the pressures they faced to integrate and assimilate into the majority cultures and religions they lived amongst. This dream, lasting 2000 years, passed down from generation to generation, is probably better characterized as a miracle.

Over the next couple millennia, we adapted to our new normal. But we carried this dream of *Eretz Israel* with us. Our Talmudic sages living in faraway lands wrote stories about the Holy Land. They studied and debated laws concerning agriculture in the land of Israel. They even recited prayers asking God to bring rain upon the land, which we chant to this day. The great Spanish medieval poet Yehudah Halevi wrote one of the most famous opening lines in all of Jewish literature when he wrote, *Libi b'mizrach, v'anochi b'sof m'arav*, "My heart is in the east yet I am at the ends of the west." There isn't a better way to describe the ancient Zionist mindset of the Jewish connection to our land.

This longing finally became an urgent need that required a solution in the late 19th century with the Russian pogroms and increase in Jew hatred across Europe. Theodor Herzl recognized this crucial moment and reached out to countless world leaders asking for assistance. Herzl, like so many of the early Zionists, was not religious. He saw a practical need for Jews to unite and govern themselves. It wasn't about returning to the Promised Land of the patriarchs. It was about survival. At one point, Herzl floated the idea of creating an autonomous Jewish land within Argentina or present day Kenya. Sadly, Herzl died while in the midst of fighting for Jewish repatriation. This movement of returning a native people to their homeland was much bigger than one man and following his death, the modern Zionist movement gained incredible steam. Herzl left something after him which was a legacy that was then carried forward by his successors.

The most significant strands of Zionism developed in the wake of Herzl's death included, Cultural or Spiritual Zionism, Political Zionism, Religious Zionism, Labor Zionism and Revisionist Zionism. Each had their own philosophies and many times the leaders butted heads with one another.

For instance, one of Herzl's most vehement critics was Asher Ginzburg, known by his pen name, Ahad Ha'am (1856-1927). He is the father of Cultural/Spiritual Zionism. According to Ha'am, Herzl totally misjudged the Arab situation. Ha'am knew that the Arabs living in Palestine were not going to welcome the Jews as long lost cousins. He felt that the Jewish political state that Herzl was fighting so hard for would ultimately be involved in constant violence and conflict. Cultural Zionists believed that political power undoubtedly leads to corruption and if the Jews get caught up in politics they will cease to be the moral people that they are. Instead, they promoted to build a strong cultural and spiritual hub of Judaism in Palestine where, for example, Jews would need to learn Arabic in order to get along with their neighbors.

And then we have Ze'ev Jabotinsky on the other end of the spectrum with his Revisionist Zionism. Jabotinsky and his followers advocated for a large scale immigration schedule in order to get the largest number of Jews to Palestine in the shortest amount of time. And not only this, but they wanted to create a Jewish state that had a Jewish majority in the entirety of Palestine, on both sides of the Jordan, to include the historical boundaries of biblical Israel. The Revisionists, more in line with Herzl than Ahad Ha'am, knew the Arab problem was inevitable so they believed Jews should prepare with military strength and not compromise or negotiate with the Arabs. So long as they did nothing to impair the birth of a Jewish state, Palestinian Arabs would be given full and equal rights.

These are just two schools of modern Zionist thought and yet they are so different. Being critical of one idea or another is fine. I welcome this dialogue. Today, I am much more a fan of Ahad Ha'am's vision of Zionism than Jabotinsky's, and I probably align mostly within the Liberal Zionist camp. But when I hear someone critique Zionism at large, or even worse, Zionists, at least to me, that looks a lot like anti-Semitism. It is hard not to feel threatened when critics disparage one of the central pillars of Judaism.

In today's climate, it seems that the loudest critics often come from the far left who equate Zionism with apartheid and European colonialism. So many young Jews today would like nothing more than to distance Judaism from

Zionism and the State of Israel. But this view of Zionism is incomplete because it fails to make the deep connection to Jewish faith and history. Earlier this past summer, I met a Jewish millennial for coffee and we ended up talking about Israel. She said, "...but rabbi, look what Zionism has done to the Palestinians. It's unforgivable."

Yes, the current situation is heartbreaking. It's a humanitarian crisis. But Zionism as an idea is not to blame. The goals of Zionism from the outset was never to displace those who were already living in the Holy Land. The main objective was to resettle Jews back into their homeland. To return home. It was to bring one indigenous people back to the land from which they came, to join the many Jews who were already there. For some Zionist thinkers, supporting Arab self-determination and national self-definition are part of what it means to be a Zionist.

While one could argue that Zionism is a success story in that we now have a Jewish country inhabited by millions of Jews from all over the world, another could argue that it is still a work in progress just like American democracy. Much needs to be accomplished to create a more equitable society in both lands. In all lands. To be a Zionist, or an American, for that matter, is to acknowledge the chasm which separates the ideal from the reality. Both are unfinished experiments. Both need fine tuning.

Rabbi Donniel Hartman recently wrote the following, "To be a Jew is to be troubled, to view one's life, and one's society, through an aspirational lens, always striving to be more. I'm troubled because this project is an ongoing process that requires constant revision. I'm troubled by the enduring gap between ideals and reality."¹

In trying to achieve our dream, we have fallen short in many respects. One's heart can ache for the Palestinians and the toll this dream has taken on them and still be a proud Zionist. One can hold these two feelings at the same time. Part of what it means to be a Zionist, in my mind, is to understand the plight of any group that desires independence and autonomy in

¹ Donniel Hartman, Sources Journal 2021, "Liberal Zionism and the Troubled Committed."

their ancestral homeland, even if this is at odds with Jewish interests. Each of us have our own narratives and connections to sacred lands. Each of us deserve the right to self-determination.

In his book, *A Letter to My Palestinian Neighbor*,” Yossi Klein Halevi writes, “...if by ‘Zionism’ one means the Jewish attachment to the land of Israel and the dream of renewing Jewish sovereignty in our place of origin, then there is no Judaism without Zionism. Judaism isn’t only a set of rituals and rules but a vision linked to a place.”² This resonates with me. Judaism would not be Judaism without Zionism. These two words are inextricably linked together. One does not exist without the other.

Sadly, most people do not see Zionism in this way. My fear is that if we allow others to define Zionism for us than we too will see it as a movement about a self-obsessed people who ignore the rest of humanity. If we allow others to define Zionism for us than we might also view it as a nationalistic movement that places white European Jews at the top of a race hierarchy and Palestinians near the very bottom.

But we can not let this happen. For we understand that there is nothing unholy about what Zionism stands for. Its most basic ideals are part and parcel of Judaism itself. Those who came before us “never stopped anticipating the moment when they would be transformed back into a sovereign nation. That hope was a foundation of their religious faith.”³ In many ways, it kept Judaism alive throughout the ages.

My friends, this word stands for so much more than modern Israeli history. It represents ages of longing, felt deep within the hearts of Jews spread across the earth. Zionism as a word might only be 131 years old, but the roots of it extend as far back as our people exist. Our Jewish heritage would be incomplete without this dream.

² Halevi, Klein Yossi. *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*. Harper Perennial, 2019. p. 42

³ *ibid.*, p. 71

My prayer is that each of us will be able to embrace Zionism in our own ways, whether that's through prayer or study, and see this word for good. May we view Zionism as the aspirational dream it is and pledge to give it the fullness of our love.