



The Inverted Ideological Pyramids of Anti-Zionist Jews: The Case of Moshe Zuckermann

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 436, March 30, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israeli professor Moshe Zuckermann's notions about antisemitism, Israel, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are representative of a current in Jewish thinking: anti-Zionism among Jews in both Israel and the Diaspora. Zuckermann's approach to developments in modern Jewry is based on assumptions that do not stand the test of historical analysis. The central factor in his thought is a visceral aversion to the Zionist idea and its realization.

It is remarkable how one remains in the grip of the cultural patterns of the group one was born into without necessarily being aware of it. Among Jews, there can be detected – even in unlikely sources – a distinctly Talmudic approach to logical thought. In this way of thinking, a scholar, building upon religious texts, comes to bizarre conclusions by dint of sheer mental gymnastics.

Professor Moshe Zuckermann, a highly assimilated Jew and a declared Marxist with no known ties to Jewish Orthodox circles, is an interesting example of this cultural power. His political ideas regarding Zionism and Israel follow one of the routes of Talmudic thinking: the pattern of the inverted pyramid, in which a broad, eloquent, and often fierce array of related views is built on a given premise. The problem with Zuckermann's logic is that his premise – the single point on which the inverted pyramid stands – is a subjective hunch that does not stand up to historical analysis.

Born in 1947 in Tel Aviv, Zuckermann spent part of his youth in Germany and returned in the late 1960s to Israel. He studied at Tel Aviv University, where he

later became a professor of history and philosophy, but has remained attuned to the German academic scene. Most of his books and articles are in German, and he is a frequent participant in interviews in the German press and at German academic conventions.

Here we consider an article Zuckermann recently published in a German Marxist review, *Neue Welt* (no. 34, February 10, 2017), entitled “German Sensitivities” (“*Deutsche Befindlichkeiten*”). In two interwoven themes in the article, antisemitism and the Israel-Palestinian conflict, Zuckermann repeats positions he has made elsewhere. His basic assumptions regarding both themes – the points on which the inverted pyramid stands – are dubious.

Regarding antisemitism: Zuckermann explains Jew-hatred as a prejudice like any other, such as xenophobia, anti-Islamism, or discrimination against women or homosexuals. This is incorrect. Anti-Judaism is doctrine, Christian doctrine deeply embedded in Western culture. It goes back to a confrontation at the very foundation of Christianity. It started with the Apostle Paul, got a full formulation by Augustine of Hippo in the fourth century, and took on new expressions in the Middle Ages. Jew-hatred underwent an astonishing transformation in modern times through adaptation into a mainly secular framework under the new name antisemitism. This strain contained a radical new goal that was not present in older Judeophobia: the extermination of the Jews, now defined as a pernicious race.

One of the illusions of our times, an understandable case of wishful thinking, is that the horrors of the Holocaust rattled Western culture enough to pave the way to an eventual end to Jew-hatred. Sectors of Western society were indeed rattled (including the Church), but a few decades of soul-searching have not proved sufficient to erase a millennia-old component of the Western spiritual heritage. Like a chameleon, Judeophobia has changed colors and leitmotifs over the centuries, and it continues to do so. Today, before our eyes, it is reformulating itself into anti-Israelism. Although anchored in the broad ideological spectrum of Western society, much of the ideological impulse of Jew-hatred in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came from the political right and nationalist circles. At present, the main impulse of the new Judeophobia comes from the political left.

Back to Zuckermann: since his starting hypothesis regarding Judeophobia is incorrect, his subsequent conclusions do not make sense. Zuckermann is certainly aware that there is an anti-Jewish trend in modern-day leftist circles, but his reasoning is complicated and unconvincing. The left, for ideological reasons of its own, is straining to find areas of understanding and collaboration with the Islamic camp. The problem is that the fundamental values of the two

sides are incompatible. Leftists and Islamists disagree on secularism, human rights, separation between state and religion, equality for women, and more. However, there is one issue on which the two sides are in accord: they both oppose the Jewish state. For Western leftists, it is a case of the old Judeophobic itch again making itself felt, unconsciously or even consciously, under new mottos. It is not so much the Jews, nowadays, but the Jewish state that is in leftist sights.

Regarding the second case of Zuckermann's inverted-pyramid thinking, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: one of my teachers at Hebrew University, Shmuel Ettinger, had a parable that is very much to the point. "Imagine a film of a boxing match that is cut lengthwise, so we can only see the movements of one of the fighters," he said. "What do we think we are seeing? A nut whose behavior defies all common sense." This is exactly how Zuckermann portrays the Israelis in conflict with the Palestinians: he cuts the film lengthwise. The aims on the Arab side, the intentions of Hamas and of Hezbollah, the threats of Iran, the fact that in the century-old history of the conflict there has not been a single case of a whole-hearted Arab initiative to reach an understanding – all this is cut from his narrative. About Arab behavior in conflicts among themselves (or with non-Muslims), there is similarly not a word. In Zuckermann's books and articles, one finds only bad Israelis burdening the region with their bad intentions.

How to explain such lopsidedness? Here, in the best Talmudic tradition, there is an additional twist (a *drey*, in Yiddish) to Zuckermann's thought. The main factor shaping his views (and the views of similar Jewish intellectuals) with regard to the conflict has nothing to do with the Arabs. What really moves him is a visceral aversion to Zionism.

Where the inverted pyramids meet: Zionism

At first glance, Zuckermann's views about Zionism seem uncomplicated. As he describes it, Zionism is one of three Jewish answers to antisemitism, the others being assimilation and socialism. Here we find yet another inverted pyramid. Antisemitism was not the main reason for the emergence of the Zionist movement, and nor was Zionism, before the creation of Israel, capable of answering the antisemitic onslaught. In 1939, on the eve of the Shoah, after more than forty years of organized, worldwide Zionist activity, the number of Jews in Mandatory Palestine reached approximately 400,000 – only about 2.5% of world Jewry. And even then, a significant part of the Jewish population in Palestine, including the ultra-Orthodox and others, were not Zionists. Antisemitism might have directed Jews to America, but it brought only a few to Palestine.

Antisemitism undoubtedly played a role in Zionism, but so did the other ways taken by modern Jewry as delineated by Zuckermann. Zionism internalized a measure of assimilation, in the sense that it adopted many of the political concepts of modern Europe. There was also a powerful socialist trend in the Zionist movement that created some of the most interesting social experiments of modern times, such as the kibbutz and the moshav. All three – antisemitism, assimilation, and socialism, as well as nationalism – were ideological elements integrated in the Zionist idea, but none was its driving power.

The thrust impelling Zionism was a potent, specifically Jewish ideal: *ahavat-tzion* (love-for-Zion) and *shivat-tzion* (the-return-to-Zion). Admittedly, these are spiritual/ideological concepts difficult to place in Western intellectual categories, and especially into Marxist ones. It was the combining of essential values of traditional Jewry with ideas taken from modern European life that produced the powerful spark contained in Zionism.

That spark was powerful enough to overcome the destruction of European Jewry in the 1940s. It was powerful enough to create a Jewish state and defend it in one of the darkest hours in Jewish history, an amazing feat. From the perspective of broader Jewish history, the creation of Israel repeated a historical pattern that is essential for the continuing existence of the Jewish people. Jewish statehood expresses the repeated adaptation of the Jews to the possibilities and demands of the present time, combined with the preservation of their specificity as a people.

None of this, however, is Zuckermann's view, and it obviously makes little impression on him. His is not an isolated case. He is part of a community of like-minded Jewish intellectuals inside Israel as well as in the Diaspora. The inverted reading of the modern Jewish condition by certain Jewish academicians is a baffling phenomenon. Among them are intelligent people and trained scholars. How is it that they lose their compass when it comes to Zionism and Israel to the point that they slip into sheer nonsense? Zuckermann, in a classical Marxist inversion, states that Zionism was always interested in the continuation of international antisemitism, since it represented – of course dialectically – a means for its own ends. Micha Brumlik, a German-Jewish soulmate of Zuckermann's, recently proclaimed that Prime Minister Netanyahu's call to French Jews to emigrate to Israel was an expression of a "Jewish death wish." In Brumlik's considered opinion, this longing "runs like a red thread through Jewish history." Zionism, then, is a death wish, not an expression of Jewish existential power.

Ideological directions in contemporary Jewry

On the map of present-day Jewish identities, where are anti-Zionist Jews? Admittedly, reflective Jews might have questions about their Jewishness, a result of the internal and external upheavals that befell Jewry in the last century. On the one hand, we have modernization, social integration into non-Jewish environments, massive migrations from one geographic environment to another, the Zionist upheaval, and the emergence of a Jewish state. On the other, we have antisemitism, the Holocaust, and now renewed Jew-hatred from diverse non-Jewish quarters. Furthermore, life does not stand still. New developments, both within Jewish society and without it (the relationship between Jews and non-Jews), are changing the character of Jewry also in our days.

Although the rebirth of the Jewish state is a historical fact for most Jews, the Zionist concept, meaning the attitude towards Israel, represents a major dividing line running through contemporary Jewish life – indeed, one that encompasses the very definition of what it means to be Jewish. Of course, the terms “Zionist” and “non-Zionist” have to be applied carefully, considering Jewish realities, and each camp has its sub-currents. The Zionist current runs from a large, general Jewish sector (inside and outside Israel) to the Judea/Samaria settlers’ movement on the other. The latter is mostly religious and politically extremist-right, and relations between the two sides of the Zionist spectrum are complex and frequently tense. Non-Zionists have their nuances too, but many of those Jews are so assimilated into their general environment that matters Jewish are almost without significance for them. They are close to a human type described by Isaac Deutscher decades ago as the “non-Jewish Jew.” There is also a third camp in contemporary Jewry: the *haredi*, or ultra-Orthodox, communities. In the last decades, the *haredi* have been growing into an increasingly substantial, if controversial, presence in Jewish life. Anti-Zionist Jews should be understood as a sub-group by itself. Last, it should be noted that it is in Israel that almost all new spiritual or ideological positions in contemporary Jewry are developing.

In that broad range of positions, running from ultra-Orthodoxy to almost total integration into the non-Jewish world, many anti-Zionist Jews belong to the assimilated fringe of Jewry. Some are perplexing figures who carry with them the hard consequences of Jewish fate in the twentieth century, yet are thoroughly immersed in Western life and culture. Their critics frequently excoriate them as self-hating Jews, a view that is simplistic and inexact: most of them are quite normal persons as long as Zionism is not mentioned. Some define themselves as Jews, most are indifferent to their Jewishness, and one, the Israeli professor Shlomo Sand, recently proclaimed (in a whole book) that he is abandoning Judaism altogether, whatever he means by that. In general, these

people show little interest in or understanding of issues that matter to contemporary Jews, such as assimilation or the resurgence of Judeophobia. Although they frequently collaborate with anti-Israel non-Jews, they do not oppose other Jews in the sense that classical antisemites do. Although critical of Israel and Israeli society, several of them live very well in Israel.

A large part of modern Jewry was touched by the Jewish spark, the dream of *shivat tsion* (the Return), and finds an emotional and conceptual anchor in the new Jewish reality of Israel even if they do not live there. Strangely enough, anti-Zionist Jewish intellectuals were also affected by the Zionist spark – but negatively. Their deeply emotional aversion to Zionism suggests a personal dimension, but that is beyond my expertise as a historian.

Anti-Zionist Jews concentrate primarily on one theme, the Israel-Palestinian conflict, but the solutions they offer are as imaginary as their analyses. Worse, their influence on the debate is highly problematic. The fact that Muslims have a misguided understanding of the connection of the Jews to Palestine is a major reason for their consistent failure to cope with what has become a major political and ideological problem for them. I have not met a single Muslim intellectual who did not repeat the canard that “antisemitism caused Zionism,” the inevitable corollary being: “The persecution of the Jews in Europe was a terrible thing. But why do the poor Palestinians have to pay for it?” Jewish intellectuals who support this approach bestow weight onto an ideological misconception, the ultimate effect of which is to perpetuate the conflict between Israel and the Arabs.

Anti-Zionist Jews also have a penchant for the theatrical. “The Destiny of Israel: How Zionism Pursues Its Doom,” thunders Zuckermann in the title of a recent book, in fine prophetic style. Neo-prophetic, actually. Unlike the prophets of old (or the anti-Zionists of the early twentieth-century), these Jewish critics do not sermonize “inside” but “outside”: they preach to non-Jews. Jewish anti-Zionism was once an internal dispute, with Jews debating Jews. Contemporary Jewish anti-Zionism and anti-Israelism is mostly an external affair, with Jews addressing non-Jews, many of them Jew-haters. And those Jews say exactly what many of their non-Jewish listeners want to hear, giving the whole exchange a surreal dimension. I cannot imagine an American intellectual critical of the US government or of American society whose main forum is, let us say, in France.

We live in a time when classical Judeophobia, in the new garb of anti-Israelism, is spreading. Encumbering the search for a solution to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is a political and ideological confrontation between most of world Jewry and the Muslims. There is no reason on earth not to believe

the Iranian ayatollahs, or any other Islamists, when they declare repeatedly that their aim is to destroy the Jewish state, and that they will do their best to achieve that goal. And they are openly supported by Judeophobic sectors of Western society.

Obviously, it is absolutely legitimate to criticize this or that aspect of Israeli life and politics. Every newspaper in Israel does it every day. To call for the destruction of the Jewish state is something else: it is Judeophobia in contemporary dress. To collaborate with parties, states, or people who support such plans, as many Jewish anti-Zionists do, is sheer irresponsibility. It is one thing when Professor Judith Butler, securely ensconced in her American university, euphemistically proposes “changes” for the Jewish state and describes Hamas as a social movement with leftist characteristics. It is something else when anti-Zionist Israelis, who live well in the country, support those intent on taking over their homes and expelling them from the land.

The “anti”-positions of anti-Zionist Jews provide them with a platform, but one does not find in their utterances an anchor in matters Jewish. Their trumpets are shrill but their analyses are incorrect, and over their message hangs a cloud of hopelessness. A bit more modesty and a dose of reflection may, hopefully, bring these anti-Zionist Jews to a better and more balanced understanding of modern Jewish history and actual Jewish realities.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family