



The Fight for Zion

by Asaf Romirowsky

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Fifty years after the Six Day War, the American Jewish community is sharply fragmented, with many Jews grappling with where Zionism fits into their Jewish identity. As the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement grows in popularity and attracts more Jewish advocates, the gap is growing even wider between American Jewry and Israel.

For American Jews, Zionism has become a source of debate, controversy, embarrassment, and guilt as they try to come to terms with the activities of the Jewish state and its elected officials. Consequently, many seek to detach themselves from what used to embody the core of Jewish identity. A case in point is Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), a pro-BDS Jewish group that uses its “Jewishness” to validate its cause.

While JVP’s desire to persuade the Israeli government to change its policies is legitimate, the growing strength of the BDS movement at large makes the demise of the two-state solution ever more likely. JVP’s executive director, Rebecca Vilkomerson, is notorious for her hard leftist views, as illustrated in her *Washington Post* op-ed entitled [“I’m Jewish, and I want people to boycott Israel.”](#) So strong is JVP’s antipathy to Israel that the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has called it “the largest and most influential Jewish anti-Zionist group” in the US.

Yet the true essence of Zionism lies in its ability to encapsulate both religious and secular Jewish identities. The current challenge is to identify the component of renewal. The Zionist enterprise did not end with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Each generation must redefine Zionism as it is relevant to them.

Theodor Herzl famously wrote in his diary, "Were I to sum up the [1897] Basel Congress in a word – which I shall guard against pronouncing publicly – it would be this: 'At Basel, I founded the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today, I would be answered by universal laughter. If not in five years, certainly in fifty, everyone will know it.'"

The difference between Herzl's generation and post-1948 generations was a first-hand understanding of what the absence of a Jewish state means for Jewish survival. The state represents the difference between autonomy and servility, indeed between life and death. But today's millennial generation has no memory of a time when Israel did not exist or was ever on the "right side of history."

Given the wedge that has been pushed between Zionism and Judaism, one might even suggest that were Herzl to raise the question of a Jewish homeland today, he might not receive support. The irony is that what initially led Zionist leaders to bond over the idea of a homeland was the growing threat of antisemitism. Today, even as antisemitism is on the rise around the world, anti-Zionism is often viewed as legitimate criticism.

Abba Eban dispelled this notion eloquently, stating, "There is no difference whatever between antisemitism and the denial of Israel's statehood. Classical antisemitism denies the equal right of Jews as citizens within society. Anti-Zionism denies the equal rights of the Jewish people its lawful sovereignty within the community of nations. The common principle in the two cases is discrimination."

But with the popularity of the BDS movement's crusade against Israel, some American Jews on the left have placed other Jews beyond the pale, as people who cannot be debated due to their abominable views. Moreover, an insidious double standard applies: Jewish organizations like Hillel must include anti-Israel voices or be deemed intolerant or racist. Jewish intellectuals must engage in dialogue with BDS representatives or other Palestinian advocates who demand the ethnic cleansing of Israel, lest they be called cowards and be subjected to insults. And now, leading American Jewish intellectuals have adopted the rhetoric and methods of BDS, to be applied to Jews only. Perhaps the next move will be to follow the Palestinian lead and charge Israelis in international courts.

Individuals like Peter Beinart, in his book *The Crisis of Zionism*, purport to offer so-called "tough love," an approach that is supposedly required to curb the alleged expansion of the "occupation." Driven by guilt, Beinart has embraced the left's move to distance itself from Israel and the Zionist enterprise at large. For Beinart, the answer is a "Zionist" boycott of Israeli settlements and products.

Beinart, like many post-Zionists and revisionists, only opposes the "occupation," which leads him to place all the onus for the lingering Palestinian-Israeli problem on Israel. In this distorted narrative, Israel is largely to blame for the collapse of the Oslo/Camp David process of the 1990s-2000s and for the subsequent failures to revive the peace process. But the centrality of the "settlements" is an empty issue. It deflects from the core problem that truly obstructs a negotiated settlement: the Palestinians' century-long rejection of a sovereign Jewish state.

There is little debate that there will be a redistribution of land in the event that a peace agreement is achieved. Most of the bargaining will be about whether these exchanges will take the shape of a total phased Israeli withdrawal, or an exchange of land annexing the more populous Israeli towns to Israel for other land in the Jordan Valley or Negev Desert. But this must be left to the parties to decide, not imposed by outside powers or guilt-ridden American Jews.

Anti-Zionist American Jews have found Israeli counterparts even in the Knesset. This was on display at the AIPAC Policy Conference in late March, at which Meretz MK Tamar Zandberg, whose trip to the conference had been paid by AIPAC, decided to join a protest outside the conference. At the protest, organized by the Jewish anti-establishment group IfNotNow, demonstrators held up signs reading "Reject AIPAC" and "Reject Occupation." Zandberg justified her decision to participate by saying, ["there is no greater deed of patriotism than opposing the occupation."](#)

Stronger Zionist anchors are needed within the Jewish community to overcome the guilt over Israel's existence rather than its actions. Collective historical memory is absent from today's discourse on Zionism, especially in America. While there are Zionists on the left and right who still appreciate Jewish history and believe in Jewish destiny, Zionist renewal *outside* Zion is needed. There is a serious need to teach and appreciate both Herzl's Zionism and "Start-Up Zionism" if the dream is to be kept alive.

Dr. Asaf Romirowsky is the executive director of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (SPME) and a Fellow at the Middle East Forum.

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