



PERSPECTIVES

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The Hysteria over the Polish Law

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The essence of Zionism as a national liberation movement is the Jewish People's return to history as a sovereign actor – a nation among the nations. Insofar as the Holocaust is not the justification for its sovereign existence, Israel's response to the Polish law forbidding Poles from being accused of involvement in Nazi crimes must take into account pragmatic considerations in the changing political arena.

The intensity of the reactions in Israel to the "Polish death camps law," which forbids accusing the Polish people of any sort of involvement in Nazi crimes, exposed a sensitive nerve in Israel's collective identity. The memory of the Holocaust is, of course, common to the country's Jewish citizens, but on this issue the reactions from the left side of the map were more vociferous. It was claimed *inter alia* that because the Holocaust constituted the justification for Israel's existence, the Polish law requires a particularly harsh reaction.

This assertion, however, couldn't be further from the truth. While the Holocaust was undoubtedly a traumatic and pivotal event in Jewish history, it was not, and cannot be, the justification for the existence of the state of Israel.

"What was the word Holocaust two years before the Holocaust?" asked the poet Meir Wieseltier. The longing for Zion, in contrast, existed long before the founding of the Zionist movement in the late nineteenth century. As Theodore Herzl stated in his closing address to the Sixth Zionist Congress in Basel in August 1903: "I want to state now in the language of our ancestors an ancient consolation that for me is also a commitment: If I forget thee, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill."

In practice, however, when it comes to state ceremonies for official foreign guests, the required visit to Yad Vashem creates the (wrong) impression that the state of Israel was born from the Holocaust. The IDF gives the Holocaust a

similarly prominent emphasis, something I experienced firsthand while attending a dinner for a delegation of American generals a few years ago. The Israeli general who hosted the event told his guests that “tomorrow you will visit Yad Vashem and understand the story of the state of Israel.” I challenged his assertion, saying that if the Zionist story was only about finding a safe haven for persecuted Jews, then Brooklyn offered a no less adequate alternative than the Land of Israel. Indeed, absent the Jewish People’s millenarian attachment to its ancestral homeland – as Zionism’s founding fathers explained decades before the Holocaust, and as the League of Nations observed in its 1922 decision to give Britain the mandate to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine – there is no justification for the existence of the state of Israel.

In his book *Between Right and Right*, the Israeli author A.B. Yehoshua rejects the Biblical/religious justification for Israel’s existence on the grounds that it “may be valid for the religious person himself, but it has no moral meaning for someone who is not only not religious but not even Jewish.” In a similar vein, he claims that the historical attachment to the Land of Israel cannot bestow a right to return and disinherit those already living there. All that remains to justify the Zionist endeavor, in Yehoshua’s view, is a right based on Jewish persecution. And what can offer a starker example of such persecution than the Holocaust?

Yet in the Zionist conception, even at a time when distress figured largely in motivating Jews to emigrate to Israel, the Land of Israel is the historical national home of *the entire* Jewish People – not a place of refuge for persecuted Jews. There is a very wide gap between David Ben-Gurion’s goal of “the full and complete redemption of the Jewish People in its Land, the ingathering of the exiles, national sovereignty” and the goal of providing a refuge to a homeless and persecuted people.

If physical security were the only thing Israeli Jews seek, then it is arguable that, Israel’s technological and military prowess notwithstanding, all that it has achieved in its 70 years of existence is the replacement of one kind of existential threat (e.g., pogroms and genocide attempts) with another (such as the Iranian nuclear program). Yet according to the Zionist idea, which was accepted without question for decades, the purpose of the Jewish People in the Land of Israel is not to seek a safe haven but to rebuild a national home. Security can be a key byproduct of Jewish statehood, but not its objective.

The essence of Zionism as a national liberation movement is the Jewish People’s return to history as a sovereign actor – a nation among the nations. Insofar as the Holocaust is not the justification for its sovereign existence, Israel’s response to the Polish law must consider pragmatic considerations in the changing political arena.

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