

A ZIONIST SALON: TOWARD IDENTITY ZIONISM, Professor Gil Troy, giltroy@gmail.com The Zionist Ideas (www.zionistideas.com)

Berl Katzenelson *Revolution and Tradition* (1934). A renewing and creative generation does not throw the cultural heritage of ages into the dustbin. It examines and scrutinizes, accepts and rejects. . . . People are endowed with two faculties—memory and forgetfulness. We cannot live without both. Were only memory to exist, then we would be crushed under its burden. We would become slaves to our memories, to our ancestors. Our physiognomy would then be a mere copy of preceding generations. And were we ruled entirely by forgetfulness, what place would there be for culture, science, self-consciousness, spiritual life?”

Ben-Zion Meir Chai Uziel (c. 1950) Nationalism is “a worldview committed to improving our human life on earth. It’s about achieving the peak of human consciousness and success, by imparting the truths about goodness and law and morality to our descendants and spreading these spiritual ideas and ethics ‘not by power and not by force’ but with explanations and insights that foster appreciation of these attitudes’ spiritual power and truth, and that cultivate goodness within all those who follow their ways. . . .”

David Hartman, *Auschwitz or Sinai* (1982) One of the fundamental issues facing the new spirit of maturity in Israel is: Should Auschwitz or Sinai be the orienting category shaping our understanding of the rebirth of the State of Israel? . . . Israel is not only a response to modern antisemitism, but is above all a modern expression of the eternal Sinai covenant that has shaped Jewish consciousness throughout the millennia. It was not Hitler who brought us back to Zion, but rather belief in the eternal validity of the Sinai covenant. . . . It is dangerous to our growth as a healthy people if the memory of Auschwitz becomes a substitute for Sinai.

The model of Sinai awakens the Jewish people to the awesome responsibility of becoming a holy people. At Sinai, we discover the absolute demand of God; we discover who we are by what we do. Sinai calls us to action, to moral awakening, to living constantly with challenges of building a moral and just society which mirrors the kingdom of God in history. Sinai creates humility and openness to the demands of self-transcendence. In this respect, it is the antithesis of the moral narcissism that can result from suffering and from viewing oneself as a victim. . . . Sinai requires that the Jew believe in the possibility of integrating the moral seriousness of the prophet with the realism and political judgment of the statesman. Politics and morality were united when Israel was born as a nation at Sinai. . . . The rebirth of Israel can be viewed as a return to the fullness of the Sinai covenant—to Judaism as a way of life. The moral and spiritual aspirations of the Jewish tradition were not meant to be realized in Sabbath sermons or by messianic dreamers who wait passively on the margins of society for redemption to break miraculously into history. Torah study is not a substitute for actual life, nor are prayer and the synagogue escapes from the ambiguities and complexities of political life.

The Jewish world will have to learn that the synagogue is no longer the exclusive defining framework for Jewish communal life. Moral seriousness and political maturity and wisdom must come to our nation if we are to be judged by the way we struggle to integrate the Sinai covenant with the complexities of political

realities. . . . We will mourn forever because of the memory of Auschwitz. We will build a healthy new society because of the memory of Sinai.

Amos Oz, *The Meaning of Homeland*, (1967): I cannot use such words as “the promised land” or “the promised borders,” because I do not believe in the one who made the promise. Happy are those who do: their Zionism is simple and self-evident. Mine is hard and complicated. I also have no use for the hypocrites who quickly resort to the promise and the promiser, whenever their Zionism runs into an obstacle and into the inner contradiction. I am a Zionist in all that concerns the redemption of the Jews, but not when it comes to the redemption of the Holy Land. . . .

Leonard Fein *Days of Awe* (1982). “There are two kinds of Zionists in the world: most of us are both. We want to be normal, we want to be special: we want to be a light unto the nations, we want to be a nation like all the others. . . . I vastly prefer a people that chooses to risk a collective nervous breakdown, as we do, by endorsing both visions, both versions.”

Herman Wouk, *This Is My God* (1969, 1974)

The special feeling that comes to one who has been a member of a minority all his life, and now finds himself in a place where everybody is like him—this extraordinary shift which changes the very nerve signals, as it were—must be a sensation that only a Diaspora Jew who comes to Israel can know. Born Israelis cannot imagine it. . . . A taxi driver courteously and ably explained to me where I had gone wrong in writing *The Caine Mutiny*, in terms not much different from the first American reviews. I was his cousin, you see; he could speak freely. . . .

There will be no death camps in the United States that we live in. History is a phantasmagoria, and anything can happen. But the civilization we know will have to be obliterated before a Hitler can sit in Washington. The threat of Jewish oblivion in America is different. It is the threat of pleasantly vanishing down a broad highway at the wheel of a high-powered station wagon, with the golf clubs piled in the back. . . . “*Mr. Abramson left his home in the morning after a hearty breakfast, apparently in the best of health, and was not seen again. His last words were that he would get in a round before going to the office. . . .*” Of course Mr. Abramson will not die. When his amnesia clears, he will be Mr. Adamson, and his wife and children will join him, and all will be well. But the Jewish question will be over in the United States. . . .

Anne Roiphe, *Generation Without Memory*, 1981 Judaism and Jewishness in America (with some exceptions) appear to be thinning. (Along with the loss of Yiddish comes a loss of the Jewish ethnicity.) . . . when I think of our traditions of the family, traditions that are eclectic, thin, without magic or destiny of time, I can see that we have made an error. I appreciate our Thanksgiving and Christmas. I know that I will make beautiful weddings for our daughters and that our funerals will serve well enough. But I do believe that the tensions of the ancient ways, the closeness of primitive magic, the patina of the ages and the sense of connection to past and future that are lacking in our lives are serious losses. . . . A Judaism that does not involve new commitments, work for others, will melt away in the heat of the barbecue on the patio, the light of the TV, the warmth of the variety of comforts now available. . . .

All Jewish rivers run toward Israel. . . . Zionism is then the yearning for completion—for the righting of a historical injustice—a response to the everpresent insanity of antisemitism. . . .

But Zionism, religious or political, is still mystical in nature. It requires a passionate

emotional commitment to the redemption—it is not a position of rationalists, for universalists. It requires unthinking commitment to one side of the story. It grants the rewards of togetherness....

Ruth Gavison, (b. 1945): I believe that a humanism or liberalism advocating a “thin person,” limited only to one’s self or one’s family, is unnecessarily sterile. Affiliations with particular group identities offer individuals central foundational missions in their lives. Indeed, the human rights tradition recognizes freedom of religion and association along with a people’s right to self-determination. There is, then, a general universal demand that individuals or groups be permitted to act on behalf of collective particularistic goals (within the operative constraints of the general humanistic framework). I, therefore, reject the claim that there is a built-in contradiction between the Jewish nationalist movement, Zionism, and human rights, which differs in some essential way from the perennial tension between universal values and a particular culture. It is interesting to note that many of those who insist on this alleged contradiction nevertheless champion other national movements enthusiastically, including Palestinian nationalism. . . .

I am a secular Jew who wants to feel fully free to seek inspiration, solutions, and elements of identity in every facet of human culture, while remaining aware that my unique culture is the Jewish-Hebrew one, in all its colors and components. A pluralistic framework enables me and others like me to engage in the urgent and vital task of infusing such a Jewish identity with meaning. To me, this process is part of the challenge of being a secular Jew. Those who reject the principle of observing Jewish law, along with substantial parts of the culture religious Judaism developed, risk ending up with a void, unless they start creating a new culture individually and collectively. . . .

Natan Sharansky (b. 1948): The Zionist idea gave me—and millions of others—a meaningful identity. In June 1967, when I was nineteen, the call from Jerusalem—“The Temple Mount Is in Our Hands”—penetrated the Iron Curtain. Democratic Israel’s surprising victory in the Six Day War, defeating Arab dictatorships threatening to destroy it, inspired many of us all over the world to become active participants in Jewish history. This notion that the Jews are a people with collective rights to establish a Jewish state in our ancient homeland, the Land of Israel, connected us to something more important than simple physical survival. Forging a mystical link with our people, we discovered identity, or as we call it, “peoplehood.” Suddenly we Soviet Jews, Jews of silence, robbed of our heritage by the Soviet regime, realized there is a country that called us its children.... The rediscovery of my identity, my community, my people, gave me the strength to fight for my rights, for the rights of other Jews, and for the rights of others, allying me with dissidents fighting communist tyranny. I discovered that this synthesis of the universal, the democratic, with the particularist, the nationalist, is central to the Zionist idea.

Jonathan Sacks, Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren? (1994)

Jewish life cannot be sustained without Israel at its core. That was true for nineteen hundred years when there was no Jewish state. It is no less true now that the state exists. One of the most profound turning points in the history of a community is when it declares that it has no interest in the return to Zion. That occurred among Reform

Jews in nineteenth-century Germany. Similarly, there are people today who claim that twentieth-century America is not *galut*. It has none of the characteristics of exile. Jews are equal, respected, and secure. They identify with the American dream. Indeed Jews have been the authors of some of its most famous expressions. The inscription under the Statue of Liberty was written by Emma Lazarus. Irving Berlin wrote “God Bless America.” As Israel is to Israeli Jews, so America is to American Jews: home.

Sooner or later, such a view spells the end of Jewish life. To be a Jew means to live between two different worlds: the finite and the infinite, the particular and the universal, here and elsewhere. Once that tension is broken, the dissolution of Jewish identity follows as inevitably as night follows day. The process takes on average four generations. But it is inexorable. A Diaspora that turns in upon itself and severs its connection with Israel is a community which, wittingly or otherwise, is breaking its links with Jewish tradition and the Jewish people and taking the first step on the path to complete assimilation. . . .

Both Jewries are beginning to see that *how* we live as Jews may be as important as *where* we live as Jews. . . . The Israel of survival was Jewry’s “city of refuge,” what A. B. Yehoshua called the Diaspora’s insurance policy. The Israel of continuity must become Jewry’s classroom, the Diaspora’s ongoing seminar in Jewish identity. Once, Israel saved Jews. In the future, it will save Judaism. . . .

Israel is now the only place in which a total Jewish experience is possible. It is the one country where Jews constitute a majority of the population. It is the only context in which they exercise political sovereignty. It is the sole place where Judaism belongs to the public domain, where Hebrew is the language of everyday life and where the Sabbath and the festivals form the rhythm of the calendar. It is the land of our origins, the terrain on which Joshua and David fought and Amos and Isaiah delivered prophecies. It is the birthplace of Jewish memory and the home of Jewish destiny.

It is impossible to overestimate the impact of Israel on the formation of Jewish identity. Jewish existence, which in today’s Diaspora may appear random, arbitrary, and disconnected, in Israel takes on coherence. There the Bible comes alive against the backdrop of its own landscape and its own language, once again a living tongue. There, too, the concept of the Jewish people becomes vivid in the visible drama of a society gathered together—as Moses said it would be—“from the ends of the heavens.” . . .

Judaism was never the private faith of isolated individuals. Its entire pulse is collective, societal, communal. From the destruction of the second Temple until the end of the eighteenth century, Jews lived in self-governing communities. Exiled from their land, they took a fragment of Israel with them. In each locality they had their own language, customs, and culture; their collective life. In the modern Diaspora, however, Judaism has been confined to the private domain of the home, school, and synagogue. Israel restores to Jewish life what it has lost elsewhere: a public dimension. Within its borders, Jewishness is *out there* in the street as well as *in here*, in the home. That is why spending time in Israel is today essential to a full understanding of what it means to be a Jew anywhere in the world.

. . .

Stav Shaffir (2015): Occupy Zionism!: Real Zionism means dividing the budget equally among all the citizens. Real Zionism is taking care of the weak. Real Zionism

is solidarity, not only in battle but in everyday life, day to day in everyday life. To watch out for each other. That is Israeliness. That is Zionism.