



The Debate on Zionism and Racism

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When Zionism arose as a political movement in Europe in the late 1800's, it came out of a context in which discussion of the "Jewish problem" was common discourse in that part of the world. Even then, 50 years before the Holocaust, Jews were enduring extreme persecution in much of Europe, and the founders of Zionism were predicting the occurrence of a major Jewish catastrophe if nothing was done to circumvent it. With such a long history of being unwelcome in European societies, the idea of creating an independent Jewish nation was a very attractive option, and possibly even seemed like the only viable scenario for Jews at that time. The alternative would have been to continue to subject themselves to anti-Semitism, or find a "host" country that would accept them. No countries – even friendlier ones like the United States and Canada – were inviting the Jews to emigrate en masse. Many Jews did not trust that any nation would be consistent in its acceptance of them in the long run, and they based that mistrust on historical reality. A national liberation movement – returning to a homeland where they could escape from anti-Semitism and gain control of their destiny – was an idea whose time had come. In that political context, Zionism seemed like a righteous cause to anyone who believed in the general right of human beings to possess freedom and self-determination.

In hindsight, it is easy to see that the implementation of political Zionism – the actual establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine – would be met with intense opposition. Arabs who were already living there felt that their land was being taken over by European outsiders. However, Zionists felt they had a legitimate claim to the land too – they were once the local residents, even if it was 1,800 years before. In most circumstances, to base their claim to the land on such ancient history might seem like a weak argument, but Jews were dealing with a context of extreme persecution at that time, which provided a context that made the claim more understandable. Also, Jews had always seen Jerusalem as a holy place; it was the birthplace of the Jewish spiritual identity. For this reason, Zionists do not see their ideology as imperialist;

they see it as a legitimate national liberation movement. But the fact remains, European Jews colonized a territory that already had indigenous inhabitants, and those inhabitants are not just going to walk away from a place where their ancestors had been settled for hundreds of years.

Zionism can be seen as a form of romantic nationalism, an ideology that arose in Europe in the late 1800's, and advocated the value of ethnic pride and cultural solidarity among people who share a common heritage. Unfortunately, history has shown that this kind of nationalism, even when initially well intentioned, may lead to discrimination toward those that do not share the national identity. Many Israelis and other supporters of Zionism will now admit to Zionism's negative consequences. Many feel badly about the plight of the Palestinians, and advocate some kind of settlement that would result in peaceful coexistence. However, most still deny any intentional discrimination on the part of the early Zionists, and claim that Israel's current discriminatory laws – such as restricting the Palestinian people's freedom of movement, limiting their ownership of property, and denying exiled Palestinians their right to return to Israel – are necessary for the safety of Israeli civilians and Israel's security as a nation.

On the other side, many Palestinians claim that Zionists knew what they were doing from the beginning of the movement in the early 1900's, and intended to create an exclusive State from the time of the Balfour Declaration in 1917 – when Britain declared that Palestine could be used as a Jewish homeland. Some feel that forcible ethnic cleansing was part of the original Zionist plan. At the very least, most Palestinians agree that the Zionists who began moving to Palestine in the early 1900's ignored the existence of the Palestinian people as a significant factor in their determination to create their own political nation – an attitude they feel must have stemmed from a sense of ethnic and cultural superiority. They see the early Zionists as imperialists, who did not recognize the rights or the dignity of the Palestinian people they found already living in their proposed homeland. According to many Palestinians, and others who criticize Zionist ideology, these attitudes amount to deliberate, unabashed racism, and should be addressed with the kind of condemnation that would be appropriate for such serious human rights violations.

The perspective that Zionism could be seen as a racist ideology first came into the awareness of many

people in 1975, when the United Nations voted, 97 to 35, to accept a very controversial resolution stating that Zionism is a form racism and racial discrimination (U.N. General Assembly Resolution 3379). Although this resolution equating Zionism with racism was retracted in 1991 (U.N. General Assembly Resolution 4686), the debate has continued, and was a major topic at the last World Conference Against Racism, held in Durban South Africa in August of 2001 (World Conference). While the perspective that Zionism is a national liberation movement seems irreconcilable with the view that it is a form of racist imperialism, a careful review of the historical evidence, as well as the current realities, may reveal a perspective that could bring them closer together. A just solution to the conflict may still be a long way off, but a dispassionate examination of the positions on both sides could result in greater understanding, and is the first step in the process of reconciliation.

In a speech following the U.N. vote on the declaration, Chaim Hertzog, Israeli ambassador to the U.N. pointed out, with great emotion, that the resolution condemning Zionism took place on the “anniversary of the night when Hitler’s Nazi storm-troopers first launched their attack on the German Jewish community. On this infamous date of November 10th, 1938, the Nazis burned synagogues in every German city, and began the transfer of Jewish people from their homes to the extermination camps. Hertzog felt that calling for the vote on that same date was an intentional cruelty. He rejected the accusation that Zionism was racist and compared the liberation movement of the Jewish people to that of many peoples in Asia and Africa who were fighting for national liberation. He also pointed out the hypocrisy of his accusers, who had not chastised the Soviets or the Arabs at all for their long history of oppressing Jews in their own countries. He described his dismay with the current policy of Palestinian Liberation Organization, which called for the destruction of the State of Israel in their 1964 Covenant. He wondered aloud why the U.N. had such a double standard regarding their criticisms on racism when comparing those directed at Israel with those directed at other countries (Israeli Ambassador 1, 3, 5-6).

After the resolution was declared, A. M. El-Messiri, advisor to the League of Arab States wrote a letter to the “New York Times,” explaining some of the reasons for the resolution as he saw them. He asserted that many Asian and African states supported the resolution that Zionism was a form of racism because they truly believed that the exclusivity of Israel was related to a supremacist attitude toward the Palestinians. He acknowledged that racism was not

an institutionalized feature of early Zionist ideology, but he maintained the position that the early Zionists attitudes contained the seeds of the discrimination toward the Palestinians that was to follow. El-Messiri went on to say that he knew of no other nation besides Israel, with the ironic exception of Nazi Germany, which used ethnicity as their exclusive criteria for citizenship. For him, this was tantamount to racism. Even so, he felt the resolution was regrettable – not because it was mistaken, but because it was counterproductive to the Israeli-Palestinian dialogue (252-254).

In examining the issue of Zionism and racism, it is important to take a look at definitions. Zionism was never a completely unified ideology, with only one clear set of principles. From very early on, Zionists were divided on the issue of whether or not Zionism merely meant Jewish renewal, or if it meant the creation of a political State. Advocates of Jewish renewal saw Zionism as an educational, spiritual and psychological movement to help Jews become more aware of their cultural heritage, and enable them to find pride and fulfillment as individuals and as an ethnic people. Advocates of spiritual Zionism felt that the Jewish psyche had been damaged by years of oppression and living in ghettos, and there needed to be a concerted effort to regain dignity and self-respect (Rubinstein, 25).

Then, in 1896, Theodor Herzl, the man considered to be the father of political Zionism, wrote a pamphlet called *Judenstaat – The Jewish State*. In this short piece of writing, he envisioned the creation of a Jewish nation. At that point he was not even firmly saying that this State had to be located in Palestine. Political Zionism, in its original form, was simply the idea that the Jews were a legitimate people – a distinct cultural entity – and as such, they deserved to be recognized as a self-determining nation. In his book, Herzl does say that Palestine would be the most likely place to create the Jewish State because it was their ancient homeland, but he also discusses other options, such as Argentina, for where this homeland could be located. He talks about creating a democratic State in which theocracy would be avoided, and all peoples would be welcome and treated with equality. (Herzl 95, 146).

A case can be made that in general, imperialistic colonialism is always based on attitudes of ethnic and cultural superiority, even if they are not explicitly racist in terms of advocating discrimination against a particular group of people. The Palestinians are barely mentioned in Herzl’s plan, and what little he says about them indicates that he believed that they would welcome the Jews, as bringers of development, culture and trade (95). In his book, *The Controversy of Zion*, Geoffrey Wheatcroft quotes a Utopian novel, writ-

ten by Herzl, in which an Arab character said, "The Jews have enriched us, why should we be angry with them? They live with us like brothers, why should we not love them?" (qtd. in Wheatcroft 84). This in itself might be seen as an excruciatingly embarrassing example of a patronizing attitude, as well as being ridiculously naïve, but Wheatcroft tells us that it was a symptom of the kind of imperialistic attitudes of all Europeans at that time (84). Also, we should remember that this kind of cultural chauvinism is still a prevalent view as reflected in the foreign policy of America and some European countries today. In any case, at the time Zionism came into existence, Europeans saw themselves as "helping" less fortunate people become "civilized." They felt that bringing people their form of religion – Christianity – as well as their economic practices and cultural values was actually a responsibility to make the world a better place – hence the idea of "the white man's burden."

When Herzl wrote about establishing Israel in Palestine, he once said, "We should there form a portion of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism" (qtd. in Perrioux, *Steuer* 139). European Jews were in an interesting position – they were seen as uncivilized outsiders by their Christian European neighbors, but they saw themselves as representatives of European culture who could only bring positive value to any place they colonized. We may now see the superior attitude inherent in this approach, but at the time it made sense in its historical context. We may also see the irony in Jews looking at others the same way Europeans looked at them, but apparently, the anti-Semitism in Europe, did not stop the Zionists from believing that they should spread European culture.

This subtler form of cultural chauvinism was not the only face of Zionist ideology. Once Herzl began to realize that the Palestinians might present a problem for his Zionist dream he said, "We must expropriate gently the private property on the estates assigned to us. We will try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying employment in our own" (qtd. in Waheed 2). In her article on Zionism and Ethnic Cleansing, Jean Shaoul maintains that plans for removing Palestinians from Israel was part of the earliest Zionist ideology. She points out that an early Zionist slogan was, "A land without a people for a people without a land." Zionist literature portrayed Palestine as a barren land that the Jews could develop for their own purposes. The population of Palestinian Muslims in 1947, as recorded by a British census, was 1,157,000. By 1949, only 200,000 remained within the boundaries of Israel at that time. Shaoul claims that

the majority had fled to avoid the Israeli terrorists, who were going from house to house, driving out Palestinian families. (1-3).

In her book, *The New Anti-Semitism*, Phyllis Chesler denies that Zionism fits the definition of imperialism because it was not a movement backed by any nation seeking to acquire additional lands or plunder resources. In fact, it took a long time for any nation to back the Zionist idea. According to Chesler, Zionism was a movement of people *escaping* from racism, not an imperialistic movement bent on ethnic cleansing. She compares it to a hypothetical situation, in which Native Americans were expelled from America, and later, after creating a movement for self-determination, they were given a small tract of land in America over which they could establish their own nation. No one would call them imperialists or racists for wanting their own land in which they could be self-determining. She claims that the Palestinians fled Palestine of their own accord, and as a result of the incitement of Arab leaders (230-231).

Even though Zionists may not have originally been economically motivated, and even though they did not have the backing of a specific country in the beginning, America and Western European countries ultimately backed them, and economic considerations surely were a factor. By 1975, when the resolution on Zionism as a form of racism was declared, it was easy to see that the countries supporting Israel had ulterior motives, and were using Israel as their representative in the Middle East – where the resource of oil was, and continues to be, a much fought over commodity. At the same time, the same can be said about the Palestinians, who were being used by the Soviet Union and Arab countries to further their agendas. Other countries had just as much interest in oil as the Western democracies, and sought to gain the good will of Arab countries that were fighting against American and European imperialism at the time, and continue to do so. On the website *PalestinianFacts*, an article on the history of the UN resolution claims that the Soviets joined the anti-Israel Arab block as leverage against the United States, while smaller Asian and African nations were intimidated by Arab-oil power. Some wanted to ally themselves with the Soviets, and others were expressing their own resentments toward American colonialism (What Was Behind the U.N.).

Supporters of Zionism have pointed out that the main countries that proposed and backed the UN resolution had a history of virulent anti-Semitism, and that to pick on Israel, with so much other injustice going on in the world – particularly in Arab States – was unfair, and had anti-Semitic overtones. The Soviet Union, who was a major proponent of the resolution,

had a long track record of extreme persecution of Jews, culminating in the pogroms of the late 19th and early 20th century, in which thousands of Jews were murdered, and their discrimination against Jews continued into the 1970's, when the U. N. resolution was proposed. In the 1950's, when Stalin realized that Israel would not become a communist country, the Soviet Union began funding the publication of anti-Semitic literature, and by the 1960's, its official position was that Zionism was a tool used by Americans and Jews to promote racism. They began to push the

U. N. resolution on Zionism only after the United States proposed their own resolutions against bigotry that criticized the anti-Semitic attitude of the Soviets (Zionism and Racism).

It is also interesting to explore the possibility that Zionism was actually being used as part of the anti-Semitic agenda of European nations, aside from their other political and economic interests. Zionism came out of the same romantic nationalism that served as the basis for Nazi Germany – the idea of creating a political nation out of ethnic unity, and tying that nation to a particular piece of land. Some have made the case that Zionism was just an extension of anti-Semitism, rather than a reaction against it because in a sense, Zionism agrees with the idea that Jews should be seen as a separate race of people (Wise 3-4). In a way, Zionism served the agenda of Europe by offering a plan to evacuate its Jewish people. That may even be the underlying reason why European nations eventually supported the idea of Zionism. In effect, they transferred their "Jewish problem" somewhere else, where they didn't have to deal with the responsibility for their own persecution of the Jews, or the consequences for the Palestinians of mass Jewish emigration to Palestine.

The issue of whether or not one sees Zionism as racist also depends on how one defines racism. Some have pointed out that Israelis cannot be called racists because Jews are not all of one race, and Jews of all races were welcomed into Israel (Chesler 228). This perspective does not really deal with what is really meant by the word "racism." The spirit of this particular criticism of Zionism – that it is racist – has to do with institutionalized discrimination in Israel, and this might include ethnic prejudice and religious intolerance, as well as classic racism. If a defense of Zionism depends on the fact that Jews are not all of one race, then one could use that same argument to say that the Nazis did not commit genocide, because genocide can be defined as the extermination of a people based on race.

Racism implies a desire to establish superiority for a particular ethnic group of people, through the use

of force or coercion. Using that definition both sides can be seen as racists. From the time that the United Nations declared that Israel was to be a Jewish state in 1947, the official Palestinian position was to "push the Jews into the sea," and it certainly seems like that position has not changed for many Palestinians. The Palestinian Liberation Organization might not have a sophisticated army, but their suicide bombers certainly wield a certain power over innocent Israeli civilians. Many see the PLO as terrorists, rather than freedom fighters with a nationalistic agenda. Many Israelis consider the origins of the Palestinian attitude to be anti-Semitic and ethnically based, and some view their charges of imperialism and racism as mere excuses for the Palestinian intolerance of Jews.

Still, even if many Palestinians are anti-Semitic, and even though Zionism may not have originated with an imperialist agenda or racist attitudes, the current situation certainly appears to have discriminatory aspects. Although the original Zionists were an oppressed people without much power in the world, the current Israeli government is now very powerful – politically and militarily. Israel is not a pluralistic democracy – it is a theocratic government run by a guaranteed Jewish majority, and Palestinians do not have equal rights in Israel. According to Dr. Uri Davis, a Jewish scholar living in Israel, 93% of the territory inside the actual State of Israel is legally reserved for Jewish people only. He compares the situation inside of Israel to the apartheid in South Africa, though he acknowledges that it is less obvious in certain ways. There are no special parks or busses for Palestinian residents, but under the surface, there is real discrimination that would be inappropriate in a true secular democracy (1, 2).

Israeli laws deny the right of return for Palestinians who had voluntarily or involuntarily fled Palestine during the wars, while allowing unlimited Jews into the country. This is, by any definition, a type of discrimination. Jean Shaoul says that after the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948-1949, thousands of Palestinians fled Israel, or were expelled. Again, after the 1967 "Six Day War" thousands more left. Currently there is an estimated 3.5 million Palestinian refugees (1). It has now gotten to the point where a physical wall divides Israel from the surrounding Palestinian villages, causing even more hardship for the Palestinian population, who cannot get to their land or their jobs, or deal with medical care and other business they may have in Israel. Even if this "apartheid" is not based on racial hatred, it is hard to argue that the reality of the separation and discrimination is not comparable.

But many Israelis believe that the original Zionists intended a peaceful co-existence, and it was the

Palestinians who refused – and continue to refuse – to live in peace. From the Israeli perspective, they felt justified in keeping the lands they gained when they won wars they saw as instigated by Palestinians and other Arabic states. They also felt justified in refusing to allow Palestinians who had fled during those wars, back into the country. Some Israelis feel that the wall is necessary for security; they feel they are only protecting themselves from people they see as terrorists. They refuse to agree to the right of return for Palestinians because they fear that a Palestinian majority in Israel would threaten their very existence as a nation. From their perspective, it is a matter of self-defense and security, not racism or ethnic intolerance.

Also, Zionists and their supporters also point out that Arabs in Israel have more freedom than they do in most Arab countries. Neill Lochery, of Christian Action for Israel, wrote an article enumerating the ways in which Israel is better for its Arabic citizens than other Middle Eastern countries. Arabs participate in the government, with 10 members of the Knesset from Arab parties. Arabs have held office as mayors and have served in the government in other ways. In contrast to the pre-1967 period, when Arabs controlled part of Jerusalem and forbade Jews access to Jewish holy sites, Arabs in Israel have full rights of worship. In general, Israel has a much better human rights track record than its neighboring countries (1-2). It does seem true that disproportionate attention given to criticizing Zionism and Israeli actions by progressive liberals, the United Nations, and other international groups, and this is unfair. Still, when Israelis point out the fact that other nations are worse than they are, it does not provide a strong justification for their own discriminatory actions.

In the course of all this turmoil, Jewish people everywhere find themselves in a very awkward position. Many Jews, including Israeli citizens, are critical of Israeli policy, but find themselves being lumped together with those they disagree with, just because they are Jews. There have been increasing incidences of anti-Semitism all over the world, including America, and in particular on American campuses. According to a recent news article, the Anti-defamation League, an organization that tracks incidents of anti-Semitism, has said that anti-Semitic acts were up 24% on American campuses (Long, 1). Chesler describes in a near riot in 2002 at San Francisco State University, in which Palestinian protestors began chanting, "Death to the Jews" and were physically threatening Jewish students on campus (145-146).

Anti-Semitic literature has been passing around on the Internet in increasing amounts. I myself, am on a number of progressive political mailing lists, and

have received some blatant anti-Semitic hate literature trying to pass as legitimate anti-Zionist criticisms. Admittedly, there is also a problem when Jewish people are defensive about Zionism, and equate any criticism they hear with anti-Semitism. But some of the anti-Zionist writings that have been sent to me personally, from people who did not know I was Jewish, have said things such as, "Historically Jews have had a bad reputation. It is their culture of money. They are pariahs everywhere they settle. Benjamin Franklin called them "vampires." He knew them from Europe and did not want them in America. America hosts almost half the world's Jewish population as their base of global power. The leadership and core of Zionism are called Jews..."

Clearly, this is hate literature. And it is alarming that these kinds of obviously anti-Semitic diatribes are being sent to me, and numerous others, by people who represent themselves to be progressive liberals. In his article, "Semites and Anti-Semites," Bernard Lewis discusses his criteria for distinguishing the new anti-Semitism from free legitimate criticism. He says that too often, those who focus on the injustices of Zionism do so to the exclusion of other forms of racism, even if they are non-Arabic Americans or Europeans who have no personal vested interest in seeing Palestinian rights as more important than the rights of other groups of people. They also ignore the problems of Arab people that are not related to Zionism, including the injustices perpetrated by Arab countries themselves. They also tend to portray Jews as rich and powerful, having great (and negative) influence in the world (6-7). I have found this to be true, and I have also noticed that in discussions of Zionism, Jews are often demonized, and the conflict is seen in very black and white terms, with the Jews portrayed as the enemy, and no distinction made between Jews, Israelis, Zionists, opinions of individual people in powerful positions, and the governmental policy of Israel and the United States.

Even in more legitimate critiques of Zionism, it is sometimes unclear whether or not anti-Zionism means criticism of the current manifestation of Zionism in the modern State of Israel, or condemnation of the idea of a Jewish homeland in any context. One Jewish student, who was getting his Master's degree at the school of Oriental and African Studies, and was an anti-racism activist, found himself accused of racism because he supported the right of the Jewish people to a homeland. His student union had made a declaration which stated "that peace required the achievement of national liberation and independence, the elimination of colonialism and neo-colonialism, foreign occupation, apartheid, Zionism and racial dis-

crimination in all its forms, as well as the recognition of the dignity of people's and their right to self-determination." He was criticized for pointing out that they may as well add "except Jews" to their statement about the rights of all people for self-determination. He felt that it was hypocritical to single out Zionism and thus imply that Jews were the only people who did not deserve national liberation and independence (Gross, 1).

I admit that many Jews, including myself at times, are touchy about people criticizing Zionism. But as a Jew, I also feel a certain sense of responsibility for actions done in the name of a Jewish nation. It makes me cringe when I hear about the injustices perpetrated by people who claim to be protecting Jews. When I read a recent news story about the killing of a Palestinian schoolgirl by an Israeli soldier, I felt as if someone had pierced my own heart. Still, it is hard to be objective about Zionism when liberals and progressives, who generally support national liberation movements, are saying that your people are the only group on Earth that does not have the right to self-determination. How can that be seen as anything other than discrimination?

The Palestinian movement for self-determination now supported by progressive liberals, is actually very similar, in both the bad ways and the good ways, to Jewish Zionism. They too, justify killing in the name of national liberation. When I hear white Americans of European descent harping on and on about the evils of Zionism, I wonder what they think about their own homes, built on the graveyards of Native Americans. Here in Hawai'i, where I currently live, white progressives may downrap Zionism one moment, and complain about the so-called "reverse racism" they experience as white people in a place where Native Hawaiians still fight for their own sovereignty. The vilification of Zionists by European Americans seems extremely disingenuous to me, and is an example of blatant hypocrisy.

Certainly there are innumerable examples of imperialism and colonization throughout history, and national liberation movements may seem like a compelling solution for any oppressed group of people. But one person's nationalism is another person's oppression. Perhaps it is the character of any nationalistic movement to have an element of ethnic discrimination towards others who are not part of the group. Nationalism is – by definition - exclusive to those of a particular nationality. It is directly opposed to a more universalistic sentiment, and the idea of a democratic, multi-ethnic, society. It may be that nationalism is not

the right solution for the Jewish people, but if that is true then it is not the solution for the Palestinian people either.

As with many controversies, there are two extreme positions on the issue of Zionism and racism, and a lot of room for discussion in the middle ground. On the one extreme we have some Zionists and Israelis claiming that their country is a pure Western democracy that is only trying to defend itself against a violent, unreasonable aggressor. They see Zionism as a completely righteous national liberation movement, akin to the Kurds struggle for self-determination in northern Iraq. On the other hand, you have some Palestinians who say that Zionism was an explicitly racist movement from the beginning, with a clear policy of ethnic cleansing as a primary component of its ideology and as a part of its on-going policy. They view Israelis as imperialist colonizers and see themselves as people defending a homeland that has been invaded by aggressive outsiders.

Although these two views seem irreconcilable, in a certain sense they are both right and both wrong. The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians can be viewed as a clash between two national liberation movements that believe their national homeland is in the same place. Each of them has exhibited intolerance of the other. When viewed from this perspective, both sides can be accused of racism; both sides can be seen as victims, both can be seen as aggressors. They each have good arguments, and no clear moral winner can be declared. Only compromise can deal with a situation with so many complexities and tragic elements.

When I.F. Stone was asked how he could admire Thomas Jefferson, when Jefferson had owned slaves, Stone replied, "Because history is a tragedy, not a melodrama." As tempting as it is for people to seek a sense of clear-cut, self-righteous purity, that is not the way of the world. Real history doesn't lend itself to the clear and clean storylines of a 90-minute television melodrama. It is time to get beyond our primitive desire for an obvious villain in this particular historical struggle. The simplistic perspective of calling the Palestinians terrorists, or calling the Israelis racists, is only counterproductive to the dialogue. The story of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a heartbreaking tale of hypocrisy, contradiction, irony, ignorance, misunderstanding, and unintended consequences on both sides. If we can truly understand that, then maybe the wounds of this long and painful tragedy can finally begin to mend.

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