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The Zionist Attack on Jewish Values

by
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On November 17, 1917 Sir Arthur James Balfour, acting for the wartime British cabinet of Prime Minister David Lloyd George, issued what has historically become known as the Balfour Declaration. Promising a national home for the Jews in Palestine, the declaration established an alliance between the Zionist movement and the British Empire. For the Zionists the end game was to turn Palestine into a Jewish state. Though the Zionist leadership probably did not initially intend it, an eventual consequence of this ambition was the transformation of institutional Judaism into an adjunct of Zionist state ideology.

Even before the Balfour Declaration was announced the danger to Judaism inherent in the Zionist state orientated ideology was sensed and criticized by insightful Jewish individuals. They would describe their anxiety in varied ways, sometimes using political, or moral, or religious argument. All of them, however, could draw on a tradition of Jewish tolerance and humanitarianism that, in its modern formulations, went back to the work of Moses Mendelssohn and the 18th century Jewish enlightenment. For instance, Ahad Ha-am (the pen name of the famous Jewish moralist Asher Ginzberg), noted as early as 1891 that Zionist settlers in Palestine have “an inclination to despotism. They treat the Arabs with hostility and cruelty, deprive them of their rights, offend them without cause, and even boast of these deeds; and no one among us opposes this despicable and dangerous inclination.” He warned that such behavior stemmed from the political orientation of the Zionist movement which could only end up morally corrupting the Jewish people.

Unlike Chaim Weizmann, who famously desired that the Jews become a nation like all other nations, Ha-am (who was dedicated to Jewish cultural revival in Palestine) believed that the return to Zion was worthwhile only if the Jews *did not* become like other nations. By 1913 Ha-am knew this was not to be, and he completely rejected the nature of Zionism as it was evolving. “If this be the ‘Messiah,’” he wrote, “I do not wish to see his coming.” In effect, critics like Ha-am were making a distinction between

Judaism, with its moral values and cultural richness, and the ethnocentric, tribal Zionism that was now coming into being.

As the issuance of the Balfour Declaration drew nearer other Jews voiced their worries. In England, on May 24, 1917, the Joint Foreign Committee of two Jewish organizations, The Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Anglo-Jewish Association issued a statement which asserted, “the feature of the Zionist program objected to proposes to invest Jewish settlers in Palestine with special rights over others. This would prove a calamity to the whole Jewish people who hold that the principle of equal rights for all denominations is essential. The [Zionist program] is all the more inadmissible because...it might involve them in most bitter feuds with their neighbors of other races and religion.” In the United States, a letter typical of the Jewish opposition to Zionism was sent by Henry Moskowitz to the *New York Times* on June 10, 1917. He wrote the following, “what are the serious moral dangers in this nationalistic point of view from the standpoint of the Jewish soul? Here are some of them: first, it is apt to breed racial egotism....the establishment of the Jewish state may coarsen the quality of Hebrew spirituality and result not in a pure but in an alloyed idealism.” A year later the debate over Zionism still went on in the American Jewish community and occasioned Rabbi Louis Grossman of the Plum Street Synagogue in Cincinnati to write to President Woodrow Wilson. He told Wilson, “...a considerable number of Jews condemn the misrepresentation and resent the campaign which is being conducted by the Zionists and the political complications into which they are dragging our faith and ideals....The Zionists may have alleged to you that Zionism is extra-religious...but there are Jews who differ from them and maintain with equal certainty that the Zionistic assertion is a violation of their religious sanctities, and they protest against the secularization of their faith.”

Even though remarkably prescient, these warnings were steadily pushed aside by the rise of Zionist ideology among Ashkenazi Jews. The cause of this was the virulent anti-Semitism in Europe. The imprinting of fear and paranoia that was the primary psychological effect of pogroms and the Holocaust seemed to render the criticism of the Zionist position foolhardy. Anti-Semitism was posited as an eternal phenomenon that could only be effectively answered by the drive for a Jewish state. However, even given these severe conditions, Jews of high intellectual and moral sensitivity still expressed important reservations about where Zionism was leading. Hannah Arendt, one of the most insightful Jewish political philosophers of the 20th

century, characterized the Zionist movement in a 1945 essay as a “German-inspired nationalism.” That is, as an ideology that holds “the nation to be an eternal organic body, the product of inevitable natural growth of inherent qualities; and it explains peoples, not in terms of political organizations, but in terms of biological superhuman personalities.” The result was a modern form of tribal ethnocentrism that led to virulent, politicized racism. In 1948 She and 27 other prominent Jews living in the United States (including Albert Einstein) wrote a letter to the *New York Times* condemning the growth of right wing political influences in the newly founded Israeli state. Citing the appearance of the “Freedom Party” (Tnuat HaHerut) led by Menachem Begin, they warned that it was a “political party closely akin in its organization, methods, political philosophy, and social appeal to the Nazi and Fascist parties.” Begin would go on to become one of Israel’s prime ministers and the present day ruling party in Israel, Likud, is a direct successor of the “Freedom Party.”

Albert Einstein, was also a Jew of acute moral sensitivities. As such he too ultimately distanced himself from both Zionism and the Israeli state it created. Like Ha-am, Einstein was most interested in a cultural safe haven for the Jewish people and this was reflected in his strong support for the founding of Hebrew University. The political policies of the Zionists, however, alienated him. In 1938 he observed, “I would much rather see reasonable agreement with the Arabs on the basis of living together in peace than the creation of a Jewish state. My awareness of the essential nature of Judaism resists the idea of a Jewish state with borders, an army, and a measure of temporal power, no matter how modest. I am afraid of the inner damage Judaism will sustain—especially from the development of a narrow nationalism within our ranks....” Later, toward the end of his life, he warned that “the attitude we adopt toward the Arab minority will provide the real test of our moral standards as a people.” An investigation of the conclusions drawn by every human rights organization that has examined Israeli behavior toward the Palestinians over the last 50 years, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Israel’s own B’Tselem, leaves no doubt that the Zionists have failed Einstein’s test.

Yet that is just the conclusion that today’s Zionist cannot face. Thus, any revival of these early and prescient objections as part of a contemporary critique of Zionism represents the promotion of supposedly traitorous anachronisms that are not only an embarrassment, but also politically dangerous. Jews who express such concerns are systematically denigrated and

non-Jews who are critical of Zionism are slandered with charges of anti-Semitism. The U.S. media, still bound by the mythology of Israel as a democratic, modern, secular state that shares America's pioneering tradition, have traditionally ignored or downplayed critics of Zionism. And, indeed, one has to hunt for contemporary expressions of these traditional apprehensions and objections. How many have heard of *Neturei Karta* (Jews United Against Zionism) or the other 18 presently active anti-Zionist Orthodox Jewish organizations?

Generally speaking these groups assert a religious objection to Zionism and claim that Jewish "peoplehood is based exclusively on the Torah" and not on the land or state of Israel. Among the more secular there tends to be a focus on and rejection of Israel's policies of occupation and colonization as the basis for a moral critique of political Zionism. For instance, there is *Not In My Name*, a coalition of American Jews founded in Chicago in 2000. The organization declares that "the State of Israel often claims to act in the name and interests of world Jewry, but ...these actions do not reflect our Jewish values and beliefs." They not only oppose Israel's present illegal occupation and colonization of Palestinian lands, but also reject as morally unacceptable the position that "Jewish survival depends on unconditional support for the Israeli government and its policies. There is also *Tikkun*, a mainly (though not only) Jewish organization that opposes the aggressive style of Zionism that has resulted in the colonization of the Occupied Territories and the persecution of Palestinians, while seeking, among other things, "the spiritual renewal of Judaism." The American organization, Jews Against The Occupation, based in New Jersey, points out that Judaism is a cultural and religious identity, which must not be equated with Zionism, a political movement." The British organization, Jews for Justice for Palestinians, affiliated with the European movement, Jews for a Just Peace, promotes the "human, civil, and political rights" of the Palestinians—the victims of the Zionist movement. These are just a few of the Jewish organizations now existing worldwide that find themselves at odds with the present political and institutional manifestations of Zionism.

Mainstream Judaism, however, is ever more closely identified with Zionism and the state of Israel. There are some 13 million Jews throughout the world (approximately 5.8 million of them live in the United States as compared to 4.6 million in Israel). According to the Jewish Agency, "70% of Jews around the world see Israel as vital to their Jewish identity." Zionist education is aimed at the remaining 30%, who are categorized as victims of "assimilation

and Jewish illiteracy.” Again, quoting the Jewish Agency, “Jewish Zionist education is a critical aspect of Jewish continuity and identity.” This effort, ongoing since before the Balfour Declaration, has been remarkably successful. Walk into the vast majority of synagogues anywhere in the world, and you will see pictures, posters, declaratory statements, or other indicators of a connection with the State of Israel. Talk to the congregants and you soon find that they see Judaism and the Israeli state as inseparably bound together. It is in fact the case that most Jews have been raised to be viscerally concerned with well-being of their tribal state. While we might not quite be there yet, the opinion of Professor Robert Wolfe is indicative of the direction in which both Zionism and Judaism are evolving. “There exist innumerable definitions of Zionism,” Wolfe tells us, “in my view, Zionism is Judaism.”

What does this growing identification mean for Judaism? To answer this question we have to look at both the ethical values that historically characterize modern Judaism and compare them to the values of Zionism as characterized by the practice of the Israeli state.

If one looks at the descriptions of Judaism’s ethical stance, particularly as expressed by concerned and learned Jews outside of Israel, we often find variations on goodness, tolerance, acceptance of others (good neighborliness), justice for all, and the maintenance of peace. For instance, the Columbus Platform of the Reform oriented Central Conference of American Rabbis states that “the love of God is incomplete without the love of one’s fellow men. Judaism emphasizes...justice for all....it aims at the elimination of man-made misery and suffering...of tyranny and slavery, of social inequality and prejudice, of ill-will and strife....It regards justice as the foundation of the well-being of nations and the condition of enduring peace.”

The more Orthodox Rabbi Naftali Brawer, representing England’s Chief Rabbi’s Cabinet at the December 2001 Interfaith Meeting on “The Peace of God in the World” told his audience that since ancient times the Jewish ethical outlook had been that “the world endures by three things: truth, justice, and peace...if there is no justice there can be no peace.” Where an interpretation of truth conflicts with the ideals of peace the Talmud teaches that “we abandon the ‘truth’ and strive instead for peace.” Part of this striving for peace (“one of the most exalted ideals in Judaism”) is the exercise of tolerance, or an “appreciation for the other. Shalom comes from the word Shalem - Whole. We must recognize that alone we are incomplete, it is only when we see the value of the other that we ourselves can be whole.”

Variations on these themes can also be found in the writings and sermons of some Conservative and Reconstructionist Jewish leaders in the diaspora. It can be argued that such an emphasis on tolerance, peace, and justice grew up because preaching them was in the interest of the historically vulnerable diaspora Jews, but this does not negate the essential positiveness of such values.

When the question of ethics and values are discussed in relation to Israel, however, there is a change of categories and interpretation. For instance, Conservative Judaism as it manifests itself within Israel as the *Masorti Movement*, declares that “the Jewish State of Israel is the ultimate concretization of Judaism’s goals and ideals.” The movement views the “building of the land and the nation as a primary mitzvah” (good deed). That is, the process of state building and reclaiming the land somehow incorporates and projects Jewish ideals, ethically and otherwise. However, the Masorti Movement does not recognize, at least in its public statements, the possibility that adaptation to a tribal (in this case manifested through an exclusively Jewish state) rather than pluralistic nationalism may negatively impact the traditional Jewish emphasis on “truth, justice, and peace.” Nor do other Zionist oriented Jewish organizations active in the United States such as *Hadassah*, *B’nai B’rith*, and *Hillel* consider it possible that a perversion of values might result from the melding of Jewish identity and the religio-tribal, Israeli/Zionist ideology. On the contrary, these groups openly assert that values of tolerance, neighborliness, and a sense of justice, can best cultivated and enhanced by the “Israeli experience”– that is, through the vehicle of the tribal state. What they mean, however, is not a universal practice of these values, but rather a practice restricted to the Jewish community.

A recent paper on “Jewish Values in the Jewish State” issued by The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs renders Jewish ideals and values into something less universal and more tribal through association with religiously defined nationalism. The paper speaks of Israelis struggling to adapt the “universalistic values of humanitarianism and social justice which Jews have acquired over centuries from the Bible and Jewish tradition” to the “specific situations that they confront” in the state of Israel. Yet the example offered by the Center refers to a situation that, from a non-Zionist, outsider’s point of view, seems to belie both humanitarianism and social justice. Thus, the example given is “the recent controversies over building the bypass roads in the [occupied] territories between those who *want the roads to be built as rapidly as possible so the peace process can continue* in the field and those...who

worried about permanent damage [caused by the road building] to the environment”(my emphasis). The paper does not mention that the construction of these roads facilitates illegal Israeli colonization, that access to them is restricted to Israelis only, and that they are used almost exclusively by Jewish colonists and the army. To what extent, the non-Zionist can ask, do such bypass roads serve to promote truth, justice, and the “peace process”? Later on in the paper we find the following statement, made without irony, “...those Jews *among the least attuned* to an overt recognition of the place of Jewish values in our society *are among the most active* in the struggle for Israel-Arab peace....The peace process...will undoubtedly be involved in the clash of values between those who see peace as a preeminent value and those who see other Zionist and Jewish values as equally if not more important” (again, my emphasis). Compare this to Rabbi Brawer’s emphasis that peace is among the highest of Jewish values, a value more important than any particular (tribal) interpretation of “truth.”

A negative transformation of Jewish values is further encouraged by the Zionist emphasis on the idea of covenant as a source of those values. As applied to Israel, the primary interpretation of covenant involves God, the land and the creation of a tribal state. That is, following divine instruction, Jews are given the land of Israel and possess it as an exclusive Jewish community. Most of today’s Jewish rituals, holidays, liturgy, and religious education have served to reinforce this position. Within the context of this defining relationship of the Jewish “nation” and God as it now acts itself out in contemporary history, those principles of the Talmud (for instance peace and tolerance) that tend to the universal are necessarily trumped, or subject to reinterpretation, by the particularism of state building and its foundational religio-tribal ideology. Disagreements might arise between the Jewish citizens of the covenant state as to the proper balance between the religious and secular norms, esoteric debates might arise as to who can perform legitimate conversions, and hand wringing can be witnessed over the effective or ineffective enforcement of the sabbath, but these are secondary to the almost unanimous belief in the divinely bonded nature of land and people. Within the Israeli context, Jewish values must conform to this a priori ideological doctrine or, sooner or later be downgraded if not discarded. Justice, tolerance, and “peace” become understandable only in reference to the advancement of tribal interests.

What happens, in practice, when this religious tribalism clashes with the traditional humanitarian interpretation of their values that some Jews of the

diaspora have continued to cultivate, not only for their humanitarian worthiness, but as long term survival principles? Here one can take the recent case of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Great Britain's Chief Orthodox Rabbi. Taking Rabbi Sacks public statements over the years as a whole it is clear that he supports the existence of Israel. Yet, in August 2002, the consequences of aggressive Israeli expansionism brought him to warn that Zionist state policies, as they manifest themselves in the colonization of the Occupied Territories and the associated persecution of the Palestinians, are perverting "the deepest ideals" of Judaism. Sacks emphasized the Jewish values of acceptance and tolerance. "Do not ill-treat a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Referring to this commandment, he observed that, "you cannot ignore a command that is repeated 36 times in the Mosaic books: 'You were exiled in order to know what it feels like to be an exile.' I regard this [tolerance and a sense of justice toward the "stranger" who shares the land] as one of the core projects of a state that is true to Judaic principle. And therefore I regard the current situation as nothing less than tragic, because it is forcing Israel into postures that are incompatible in the long-run with our deepest ideals....There is no question that this kind of conflict, together with the absence of hope, generates hatreds and insensitivities that in the long run are corrupting to a culture." It is clear that the culture he is concerned about is Jewish culture itself, as it has metamorphosed under the influence of Zionist tribal nationalism.

Diaspora reactions to Sacks's assertions were mixed. The Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues in England supported him. "What Jonathan Sacks has said is what liberal and reform rabbis have been saying for many years." On the other hand Likud-Herut GB (Great Britain) asserted that Sacks position was one of "moral blindness." In the United States, where most official Jewish organizations are lock-step supporters of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and the Likud Party, Sacks was largely ignored or given short shrift. For instance, in the case of the major American Jewish newspaper the Forward, Sacks's remarks got scant coverage. What there was, however, ended with this quote from Rabbi Sholom Gold, dean of the Jerusalem College for Adults in Israel, "...it is extremely sad for me to hear him make comments of such a nature which for all intents and purposes will now make him irrelevant in the world Jewish community." In Israel major news and official outlets were often harshly condemnatory.

On August 8, 2002 the *Jerusalem Post* published an editorial that called Sacks's remarks "morally inexplicable and astonishingly naive." *The Post*

continued, "For Sacks to lecture us about 'our deepest ideals' is worse than insulting...it deprecates the fundamental value that we are fighting for our freedom and our very lives....Indeed, rather than 'corrupting' us this war of self-defense has brought out some of our finer qualities, such as patriotism, national pride, and willingness to make personal sacrifices on behalf of the common good." *The Post* then called on Rabbi Sacks to resign his position as Chief Rabbi. The official Voice of Israel radio combined descriptions of Sacks's criticism with the fact that the Chief Rabbi had recently met with Iran's ayatollah Abdullah Javadi-Amoli at a UN conference of religious leaders in New York. Sacks had said that he and the ayatollah, as two men of faith, had "quickly established a common language." What Rabbi Sacks meant was the "particular language believers share." However, the way the Voice of Israel reported it implied a connection between Sacks's criticism of Israel and his "common language" with the Iranian cleric. To those, such as Rabbi Arik Aschermann, the head of the Jerusalem based Rabbis for Human Rights, the aim of the Voice of Israel was clear, the criticism of Rabbi Sacks "was an effort to discredit him."

Those who assert that Zionism is the truest form of Judaism must dismiss or discredit the critics of Israeli policies. For these Zionists it is logically impossible for such policies to do damage to Judaism because faith and fatherland have been melded into one. Those who, like Sacks, imply that Israel's behavior may indeed do such damage appear as traitors. Therefore, they must be rendered "irrelevant to the world Jewish community." It would be interesting to see how today's tribal Zionists would react to the statement made in 1961 by the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. Essentially sharing Sack's distress, Buber asserted that "Only an internal revolution can have the power to heal our people of their sickness of causeless hatred....Only then will the old and young in our land realize how great was our responsibility to those miserable Arab refugees in whose towns we have settled Jews who were brought here from afar; whose homes we have inherited, whose fields we now sow and harvest; the fruits of whose gardens, orchards and vineyards we gather; and in whose cities that we put up houses of education, charity, and prayer...." Buber concluded that the situation was so morally reprehensible that "it is bound to bring complete ruin upon us." Buber too would now have to be labeled "irrelevant in the world Jewish community."

The continuing disagreement as to what constitutes the real values of the community has, in effect, split Judaism into majority and minority parties.

The majority element, which controls the religion's institutional manifestations, openly identifies itself and its ethics with the expansionist, brutalizing policies of the Israeli tribal state. They have given themselves and their religion over to the Zionist dream of a Jewish state. What they have inherited, however, is the very worst aspects of nationalism that comes when nationhood is pursued not in a pluralistic spirit, but in a tribal one: chauvinism, aggressiveness, and xenophobia. As a result there has been a militarization of the Jewish mind, the Passover ritual and other Jewish celebrations have been turned into paeans of nationalism, imperialism and colonialism, and Zionist nationalists have invented (as a vicarious act of fratricide) the category of "self-hating Jew" for those who share their religion but not their politics.

And what of those other, hopefully more authentic Jewish ideals, the humanitarian ones? They have gone over to a small minority of the Jewish people who seek to promote them as a curative to the values that underlie the aggressive and colonialist policies that now characterize Zionist-Israeli behavior. It is worth noting that this minority appears to be growing. Jewish activists, both within Israel and the diaspora, now organize and support boycotts, divestment campaigns, and demonstrations that spotlight the aggressive and oppressive policies of the Zionist state. These people are Judaism's best hope for the future. They are also Israel's best hope, in that the interpretation of Jewish values they preserve may help to eventually de-tribalize, and civilize that country. *Civilitas successit barbarum*—with struggle civilization can succeed barbarism.

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