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Jewish transformation – Judaism 3.0

Zionism, the national expression of Judaism, is becoming its primary organizing principle **By Gol Kalev**

RELIGIONS, NATIONS, movements, companies and concepts all go through transformations in reaction to changing circumstances, and there has been a radical change in Jewish circumstances over the last 150 years:

1. The Jewish state was reestablished as a result of the foundation of the Zionist movement;
2. Jews redomiciled. More than 98% of Jews have immigrated during the last 150 years, primarily moving from Europe and the Middle East, to America and Israel;
3. Jews became secular, abandoned their insular communities and began marrying non-Jews.

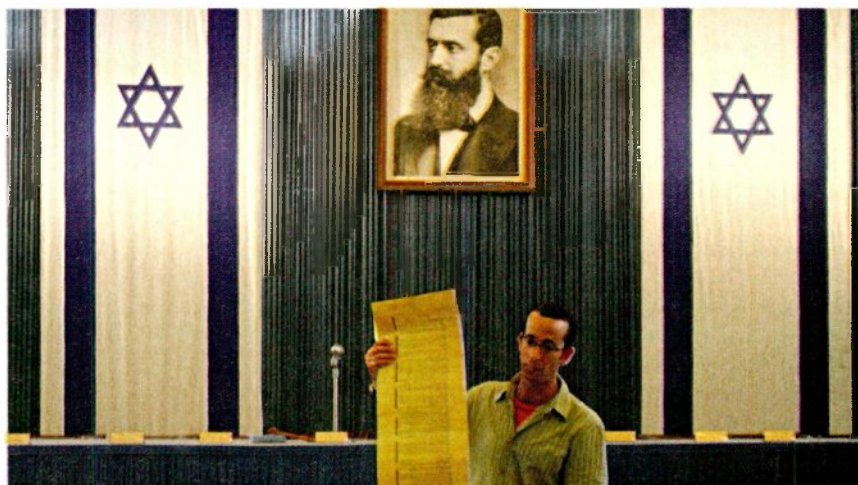
As a result, the Jewish nation-religion is going through a historic transformation. Judaism can be viewed in two primary contexts:

Rabbinic Judaism is the religious expression of Judaism, through all its streams including Orthodox, Conservative, Reform.

Zionism is the national expression of Judaism, with Israel being the physical manifestation of Zionism.

The transformation to Judaism 3.0 suggests that the organizing principle of Judaism is shifting from the religious element (Rabbinic Judaism) to the national element (Zionism). This is occurring without any compromises to the religious aspects of Judaism. In fact, it is neutral with regard to any debates about Jewish laws and practices.

Judaism was original bound by the architecture of Biblical Judaism (Judaism 1.0), which was centered around the Temple, the ritual of the sacrifices, Jerusalem and the Land of Israel. This was shattered with the destruction of the Temple and expulsion during the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. Judaism had to transform in order to survive, and indeed it has – into what became known as Rabbinic Judaism (Judaism 2.0). This remained the architecture that bound the Jewish nation-religion through the exile up to today: *Halakhah* (Jewish law), the rituals, the canonization of the Oral Torah, the learning,



A guide stands under a portrait depicting Theodor Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, as he holds a copy of Israel's Declaration of Independence in the building where it was first read by David Ben-Gurion in Tel Aviv

the yearning to return to the ancestral homeland. But given the radical changes of the last 150 years, Rabbinic Judaism is no longer the relevant organizing principle of Judaism. Zionism (Judaism 3.0) is turning into the architecture through which Jews connect to their Judaism, and by which the outside world perceives the Jews.

Transformations typically occur some time after the events that triggered them have taken place. That was the case in the previous Jewish transformation and that is the case today.

Circumstances in both Israel and the Jewish world made a transformation unrealistic around the time the changes occurred and until recently. But now, the transformation is both a reality and a necessity. Hurdles to the transformation have now been removed, enablers of the transformation are in place, and the transformation is increasingly becoming evident.

An early hurdle to the transformation was Israel's strong secular identity. Zionism could not be the organizing principle of Judaism when Israel was so closely associated

with secularism. But as Israel further democratizes, there is a shift of power and narrative from the secular minority towards the religious/traditional majority. At the same time, secular Israelis are increasingly embracing Jewish religiosity on their own terms while remaining secular. In addition, early opposition to Zionism in the Haredi community is gone. Zionism serves as the bedrock of the Jewish state. Over 99% of Israeli Jews vote for Zionist parties.

The transformation is enabled by developments in North America, home to over 80% of Diaspora Jews. There is a cultural Israelization of the American Jewish experience. This is occurring as old Jewish connectors, such as Yiddish culture and the Holocaust, become less relevant for younger generations. For American Jews, happiness is replacing sadness, Wonder Woman is replacing Yentel, strength is replacing victimhood.

Such cultural Israelization was not possible when Israel was a "charity case," but is happening today due to the multitude of Israeli products and experiences through which an

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American Jew can now connect: technology and innovation, entrepreneurship, Israeli wine, Israeli soldiers, Israeli culture. Zionism has not only picked up from Rabbinic Judaism the role of being a light to the nations, but it has also become a light to Judaism.

Even the passionate political debates and criticism of Israel by a significant portion of American Jewry are a form of connection to one's Judaism through Zionism. For many young liberal and progressive Jews, Zionism became the primary arena in which they meet their Judaism.

For American Jews, centering one's identity around Israel was difficult in the past also because what Israel expected of American Jews was aliyah (immigration to Israel). However, by the 21st century, the Israeli government, society and even the Jewish Agency softened that expectation and now merely encourage American Jews to strengthen their connection with Israel.

This enables American Jews to recenter their Jewish identity around Zionism. Israel, the vibrant geographical representation of Zionism, provides the American Jew with a strong tangible point of orientation, and unlike in the past, this is now possible without ever visiting Israel.

The transformation to Judaism 3.0 in America is not only a reality, but also a necessity: Upon arrival to America, many Jews were religious, spoke Yiddish and married other Jews. Being part of the Jewish nation-religion was core to their identity. But over the years, a denationalization occurred, reducing American Judaism to the "Jewish church."

This could have worked if the Jews remained religiously connected, but most turned secular. For a small percentage of American Jews – Orthodox Jews and those involved in Jewish causes – Judaism remains an integral part of life, but for the majority, Judaism became subordinate to other components of their identity.

American Jews were able to remain a distinct community through the early 21st century with the help of temporary replacement glues – the memory of the Holocaust and nostalgia for the Eastern European past. But with the passing of the survivors and immigrant

FRANK SHERSHEL / GPO



Israel's first prime minister David Ben-Gurion sits under a portrait depicting Theodor Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, before the reading of Israel's Declaration of Independence in Tel Aviv on May 14, 1948

generation, circumstances are changing. Without the religious and community glues, and absent the national connection that previously existed, mainstream American Judaism is now on a path of evaporation.

Paradoxically, if this evaporation of American Jewry were to continue, then Judaism would indeed be Zionism (Judaism 3.0), since the overwhelming majority of Jews would be in Israel, where Zionism is the key connecting thread.

However, an alternative to Jewish evaporation has emerged – Jewish transformation. Developments in America serve as a strong

enabler of such a transformation.

At the onset of the American experience, there was gravity towards a homogenous narrative ("The Mayflower narrative"). Yet America has shifted over the years towards embracing multiple cultural branches of Americanism as long as they are rooted in the strong core American narrative. This is in sharp contrast to the European version of multiculturalism: A condominium of multiple cultures in conflict with one another and with no common trunk – a loose combination of "parallel societies." In the past, Jews who wanted to assimilate and resemble their

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patriotic American neighbors felt they had to suppress their Jewish national affiliation. But today's patriotic neighbor celebrates his ethnological national affiliation – be it Mexican, Irish or Korean. As an indication of that, two Cuban-Americans running for the Republican nomination for president in 2016 repeatedly argued which one of them is more Cuban, not which one is more Christian.

Moreover, right from the beginning, America was about the renewal of the ancient promise: the establishment of a new Jerusalem, rejection of the oppressive nature of the European past, freedom of worship. From the onset, Americanism was a form of abstract Zionism. When tangible Jewish Zionism began to take shape, it was synergistic with the American version of Zionism.

Therefore, American Jews proudly showcasing their Zionist affiliation is not only consistent with the existing American narrative, but it is a powerful demonstration of the core of Americanism.

In addition, America and Israel are both religious societies. Yet, American Jews, for the most part, are no longer religious. In fact, American Jews are perceived to be one of the primary flag carriers of secularism in America. The vast majority of Americans are devout Zionists but are not secular. As a result, Zionism, the national expression of Judaism, is even more aligned with the predominant American narrative than the secular expression of Judaism.

The transformation to Judaism 3.0 is also supported by global shifts and the world's perception of Judaism. Throughout its history, Judaism has been repeatedly defined by external society. These societies have consistently viewed Judaism in a national context, not just in a religious context. That has been the case for both friends and foes. For example, the multiple deportations of Jews from European countries, the Inquisition, the Dreyfus Affair, the Holocaust and the ethnic cleansing of Middle East Jews were all directed at the Jewish nation, not at the Jewish religion (options to convert were not truly offered).

This is the case today, as well. While Jews themselves may not yet fully be at Judaism 3.0, the world certainly is. Most notably, this

is reflected in the current state of the relationship between Europe and the Jews. This relationship dates back 2,300 years to the Greek invasion of Judea and continued through centuries of Jewish refugees living in Europe. While there have been periods of peace or at least containment, the Europe-Jewish relationship has repeatedly cycled back to conflict.

Europe has persistently and continuously objected to Judaism. Whatever form Judaism took, Europe was there to counter it, developing philosophies and mechanisms that were relevant to the evolving condition of Jews and Judaism. Similarly, the nature of European opposition to Judaism was also a function of evolving European realities (“all political is local”).

This historical pattern continues today. Judaism evolved: The reestablishment of the Jewish state is the most astonishing development in the last nineteen centuries of Jewish history. As a result, Europe has funneled its entire opposition to Judaism through its relationship with Zionism and by extension, the State of Israel.

Europe evolved: It is now secular, post-ideological, and human-rights conscious, and hence uses such tools and language as the currency of its opposition.

This is reflected in the expansion and mainstreaming of Europe's “Israel-bashing” culture. It is expressed in Europe's intense criticism of Israel's right to self-defense, and in the fast-expanding industry of blood libels originating once again in Europe (such as “the genocide in Palestine” and “the massacre in Gaza”).

Israel-bashing is the current evolution of centuries-old European Jew-hatred. It is arguably, much stronger, well-financed, and integral to contemporary European culture than previous iterations of Jew-hatred. This includes antisemitism that began in late 19th century as a fringe movement and within 50 years led to the Holocaust.

The shift in European opposition to the Jews is an indication that Judaism has transformed: from opposing Judaism through antisemitism to opposing Judaism through Israel-bashing; from opposition to Judaism 2.0 (Rabbinic Judaism) to op-

position to Judaism 3.0 (Zionism).

On the flipside, admiration of the Jewish state in Asia, Africa, Latin America and through much of the Christian world translates into renewed admiration of Judaism. This as well is indicative of a Jewish transformation.

When planting the seeds to the transformation in the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897, Theodor Herzl made it clear that Zionism was not merely about the establishment of a country. When he wrote, “In Basel, I founded the Jewish State,” he clarified, “a territory is merely the concrete basis. The state itself, when it possesses a territory, still remains something abstract.”

That abstraction is now turning into the architecture that allows contemporary Judaism to thrive, addressing its existing challenges, threats and opportunities. When the organizing principle of Judaism is the Jewish nation, the intensity of debate about religious issues gets significantly reduced.

Herzl recognized that his ideas will encounter both external and internal opposition: “We shall have to endure hard and bitter struggles: With regretful Pharaohs, with our enemies, and above all with ourselves,” he wrote. The transformation to Judaism 3.0 addresses the multiple camps of opposition. It allows secular, unaffiliated and religious Jews alike to embrace Judaism and it provides the vehicle for the world's nations to finally accept Judaism.

The transformation to Judaism 3.0 is successful because it is simple. It does not require legislation, a political movement, or even a decision. In fact, just like Herzl described his original vision 120 years ago, today's transformation is not based on a new discovery and its existence is already a reality. It is the result of an inescapable conclusion rather than that of a flighty imagination.

With a delay of 120 years, the vision Herzl articulated in the first Zionist Congress is turning into a reality: “Zionism is the return to Judaism.” ■

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