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: Zionisms developing orthodoxy

Zionism's developing orthodoxy

LIVING THE DREAM
• By URI PILICHOWSKI



Zionism has always been a movement diverse in members and thought. Early Zionism featured at least eight different streams – spanning from Echad Ha'am's cultural Zionism that didn't require a physical state to Rav Abraham Isaac Kook's mystical Zionism that considered a Jewish state to be the first step toward a messianic redemption. Zionism boasted of its wide tent, accepting all different visions of the Jewish rejuvenation and not excluding the wildest of ideas.

Zionism's diversity allowed the movement to be inclusive and to grow. The early Zionist congresses in Basel, Switzerland, found Jews of all stripes and viewpoints coming together with mutual respect and disagreeing with civility. The pinnacle of Zionism's diversity was demonstrated when Dr. Theodor Herzl presented the "Uganda Scheme" to the 6th Zionist Congress in 1903, which had the potential to divide and destroy the new Zionist movement.

The early Zionists had sufficient foresight to realize that however passionate their feelings about the Uganda scheme were, unity and inclusion were more important than their own position. After fierce debate, a vote was taken and the Zionist movement continued to grow.

Orthodoxy is a state of principles that develop when a group of people who have spent generations thinking, arguing, and living for a cause declare a redline. They develop a series of principles all members must align with to be included in the movement. These firm principles are a fence built around the cause to protect it from coming apart. As long as a person stays inside the redlines, they are considered dedicated to the cause. If people cross the redline, the group dedicated to the cause excludes them.

In short, orthodoxy is the "non-negotiable core" that a community agrees to defend together, because they're convinced that if that core goes, the whole cause they've dedicated their lives to collapses.

ORTHODOXY IN Zionism has been developing over the past few decades, and increasingly in the past two years surrounding three different wedge issues:

1) *Religion*. Currently, the State of Israel neither supports, defends nor recognizes Judaism as many Zionists practice it. Many of them have trouble supporting a state that doesn't align with their values.

2) *The unresolved status of the Palestinians*. Many Zionists think that the Palestinians' lack of full self-determination, and other accoutrements of sovereignty because of Israeli policies, isn't consistent with their values.

3) *Disillusionment with the current Israeli government*. Many Zionists strongly disagree with the values and policies of the sitting Israeli government. They consider it to be unfair to make unconditional support for the Israeli government a litmus test to be considered a Zionist.

The increasing ideological divide seen among Zionists today has largely developed as a result of the war in Gaza. Orthodoxy in Zionist thought has grown since the October 7 attacks. Many Zionists felt threatened by Palestinians in Gaza, Palestinians in the West Bank, Lebanese in Lebanon, Syrians in Syria, Yemenites in Yemen, Iranians in Iran etc.

But some Zionists perceived these threats differently. While they saw Hamas attack from Gaza, they were largely unaware of attacks stemming from the West Bank, Hezbollah from Lebanon, Al-Jalali's forces in Syria, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Iranian regime in Iran. And while many Zionists saw terrorist groups attacking, many others who were personally under actual attack from missile fire during the war didn't see organizations and armies, but rather threats – and those threats weren't solely abstract fears, but had faces: and they belonged to people, not organizations and militaries.

This is just one example of how different experiences among Zionists generate different perspectives and viewpoints. This is what has created the divide among the three wedge issues mentioned above.

THE PROBLEM with orthodoxy in Zionism is that it is inconsistent with the diversity in the Jewish community. Inflexible redlines alienate many in the Jewish community with different ideas of Zionism. Jews offering full-throated support for Israel, its military, and its government are at odds with committed Zionists who are critical of the conduct of the war and Israel's political direction.

Zionism used to be defined by a wide range of voices and opinions, but it is increasingly being defined by a smaller and more uniform group that is setting policy in action. Increasingly, Zionists who violate the redlines find that the orthodoxy of Zionism won't expend any effort on their thoughts and even existence. It is understandable why these Zionists feel ostracized and find it increasingly difficult to defend and advocate for Israel. They claim there is more than one way to love and support Israel.

One of Zionism's foundational principles is that it is a democratic movement that doesn't give any one type or group more power than any other. Democratic movements service constituents, not values. When the majority of constituents feel one way, they will elect similar thinking leaders who will follow their viewpoint. While it is the responsibility of the majority to ensure it doesn't become tyrannical and to be as inclusive as possible of minority opinions, it is delusional of minority opinion holders to imagine that elected officials will follow their viewpoints over the will of the majority.

THE PHRASE "elections have consequences" charges minority opinion holders to market their viewpoints better to win the next election. Demanding that their viewpoints should be followed simply because they hold them is absurd.

As a democratic movement, Zionism will be defined by those who express their commitment to the cause. As more Zionists refuse to align with the redlines of its new orthodoxy and feel alienated from the movement, they will exclude themselves from the policy making that determines its future – becoming an alienation feedback loop that encourages more and more Jews to feel alienated from Zionism.

In the end, Zionism's historic strength lies in its refusal to draw redlines that would exclude passionate Jews who disagreed on means yet share the same destination. The emerging orthodoxy, however understandable amid existential threat, now risks shrinking the tent until only one voice remains. If Zionism becomes synonymous with unquestioning alignment on religion, Palestinian rights, and government policy, it will cease to be big enough for the Jewish people. A movement born in diversity cannot survive by enforcing conformity; it will either return to its wide-tent roots or watch its most devoted critics walk away.

At the same time, minority opinion holders within the Zionist tent must have the humility to recognize that they have not won the elections of public opinion. They don't have the right to impose their viewpoints on those who disagree with them, but instead need to find a way to fight alienation when they aren't getting their way.

Zionism thrived on diversity without redlines; emerging orthodoxy risks shrinking the tent. Yet minorities must accept democratic defeat gracefully instead of walking away or demanding veto power over the majority.

The writer is a Zionist educator at institutions around the world. He recently published his book Zionism Today.