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: ?What is Zionism

What is Zionism?

Why misunderstanding it has left Jews unprepared for the future

• By ADAM SCOTT BELLOS

Zionism is one of the most misunderstood political movements in modern history – and not only by its enemies. It is misunderstood by Jews themselves, by Jewish institutions, and by the leadership class that claims to speak in its name.

Ask most people today what Zionism is, and you’ll hear familiar answers: a belief in Israel’s right to exist, a response to antisemitism, a refuge after the Holocaust, or a synonym for Jewish religion with a flag attached. All of these are incomplete. Some are dangerously wrong. Zionism was never meant to be a slogan. It was a plan.

Zionism emerged as the national liberation movement of the Jewish people – not a theological project, not a humanitarian impulse, and not a branding exercise. It was born from the recognition that Jewish survival could not indefinitely rest on faith, philanthropy, or moral appeals to others. It required political agency, physical transformation, and national responsibility.

That insight was most clearly articulated by Theodor Herzl, who wrote that the Jews had been “reduced to nothing but the faith of our fathers.” This line is often misunderstood. Herzl was not calling for the abandonment of Judaism, nor was he dismissing the genius of rabbinic survival. He was diagnosing what two thousand years without sovereignty had done to Jewish life: a civilization forced to survive without its body. Land, labor, self-defense, political authorship, and normal participation in history had been stripped away, leaving faith to carry what had once been a full civilizational structure.

That was not moral decay; it was constraint. Faith preserved Jewish continuity in exile – but it could not substitute for nationhood. Zionism sought to restore everything else that once supplemented Jewish life: agriculture, industry, culture, physical confidence, and political power. In other words, Zionism was about turning Jews from a purely reactive identity into an active national civilization again.

THIS IS why early Zionism was obsessed with the physical: draining swamps, working the land, reviving Hebrew, creating new social types, and forging what thinkers like Max Nordau called the “New Jew.” This focus was not crude or utilitarian: It was restorative. A people conditioned by centuries of powerlessness had to relearn how to stand upright in history, inhabit space, and speak in its own voice.

Crucially, this national rebirth was never inherently anti-religious. Zionism did not seek to negate Jewish observance; it sought to free Judaism from being the sole container of Jewish existence. Religion was meant to be one pillar of Jewish life – not the last surviving one.

Just as importantly, Zionism reshaped Jewish consciousness across generations. It produced the first modern Jewish generation raised not to assume impermanence but to take responsibility; not to wait for his-



A STATUE of Theodor Herzl at Mini Israel in Latrun. Zionism was never meant to be a slogan. It was a plan, the writer says. (Shutterstock)

tory but to enter it. In this sense, Zionism functioned as a form of Jewish self-decolonization – undoing centuries of dependence, internalized vulnerability, and borrowed identities.

What has been lost – perhaps fatally – is Zionism’s movement dimension.

The Zionist movement was once organized, strategic, and unembarrassed by seriousness. The World Zionist Congress was not a forum for platitudes. It debated land acquisition, immigration policy, education, defense, and economic development. Delegates arrived not with slogans or protest attire but in formal attire, carrying themselves as representatives of a people reclaiming authorship of its future.

Zionism functioned as a national operating system, translating ideas into institutions and ideals into discipline. From the outset, the movement recognized that not every Jew would immediately immigrate to the Land of Israel. There was Zionism in the land – and Zionism in preparation.

Jews who had not yet made aliyah were still expect-

ed to become Zionists mentally, emotionally, and ideologically: to think nationally, to orient Jewish life toward sovereignty rather than exile, and to see Jewish continuity as their responsibility. That preparatory work mattered. It was how Zionism transformed not just territory but behavior – how it cultivated discipline, seriousness, and readiness. Zionism was never merely an identity: It was a practice.

Today, that framework has eroded.

THE FAILURE of Zionism in recent decades is often framed as excess – as though it demanded too much, moved too fast, or asked Jews to sacrifice more than they could bear. The opposite is closer to the truth. Zionism did not falter because it asked too much of Jews. It faltered because it gradually stopped asking enough.

When Zionism ceased to demand responsibility, discipline, and preparation, it lost its capacity to plan. And when planning disappeared, so did preparedness – physical, cultural, and communal. What

remained was symbolism without obligation, identity without consequence, and solidarity without structure.

This is why there is no shared plan for the future.

When Zionism is misunderstood as merely “supporting Israel,” Jewish leadership becomes passive. When it is framed only as a response to antisemitism, Jews are permanently on the defensive. When it is reduced to sentiment rather than obligation, the most basic Zionist imperatives – preparedness, resilience, and self-defense – are treated as optional or extreme rather than essential. Zionism has always been about taking responsibility for Jewish bodies as well as Jewish souls. A movement that no longer asks Jews to prepare themselves cannot protect them.

The religious-secular divide that dominates Jewish discourse today is part of this failure. It is a Diaspora sorting mechanism, not a civilizational truth. Zionism never asked whether a Jew was religious or secular. It asked whether Jewish life was whole – lived fully, culturally, physically, and historically. Whether Jews breathed Jewishness rather than outsourcing it to ritual or identity alone.

Zionism was never meant to end in 1948. Statehood was a milestone, not a finish line. The establishment of Israel was meant to recenter Jewish life globally, not absolve Jews everywhere else of responsibility. When Zionism became something to support rather than something to practice, seriousness faded – and preparation faded with it.

THERE IS an ancient teaching in the rabbinic tradition that urges people to plant trees even if they know they will never sit in its shade – because responsibility is measured not by reward but by continuity. It is an investment in a future the builders themselves might never enjoy. That responsibility also requires listening to those who will inherit tomorrow, as they must carry forward what is built and decide how it will live in the next generation.

Zionism does not disappear when it is misunderstood or attacked. It disappears when it is reduced to sentiment, stripped of discipline, and emptied of obligation. A national liberation movement that no longer asks its people to prepare their bodies, their communities, and their future cannot sustain itself for long. History has never been patient with people who confuse memory with readiness or solidarity with responsibility. Consequences do not announce themselves in advance; they arrive fully formed.

Zionism was not completed by those who began it; it was entrusted – unfinished – to those who came after.

The writer is the founder and CEO of The Israel Innovation Fund. He leads initiatives, including Wine on the Vine and Project Maccabee, that focus on strengthening Jewish continuity, resilience, and sovereignty. He is the author of the forthcoming book Never Again Is Not Enough: Why Hebraization Is the Only Way to Save the Diaspora.