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: Zionism 2.0: From Security-Based Zionism to Spiritual Zionism



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Rabbi Doron Perez

The rebirth of Jewish statehood through political Zionism stands as one of the most remarkable historic achievements of the modern era.

Despite this remarkable achievement, only one country - Israel, of all 200 or so countries in the world today - still has to fight continuously for its very legitimacy. Only the one Jewish state and Jewish communities around the globe face systemic demonization campaigns that have become daily security threats.

Why? Why is there no global delegitimization campaign against either India or Pakistan, despite the large disputed area of Kashmir, where more people have been killed than in the entire Arab-Israeli conflict - and despite the fact that both were founded at the same time as Israel, with much bloodshed and population transfers? Not to mention Western Sahara's disputed territory with Morocco or Northern Cyprus' occupation by Turkey, to name a few.

Why, in a world of 50 Islamic-majority states and almost 100 Christian ones, is the desire of the Jewish people to have just one state of its own in its ancestral homeland seen as racist or exclusionary - worthy of degradation and demonization?

Perhaps the challenge of irrational antisemitism in its current iteration of anti-Zionism contains the key to a great opportunity for the future of Israel. Perhaps today's turmoil can birth a new era of Zionism - a shift from security-based secular Zionism to a spiritually based,

mission-driven one. Evolving from a desire for "normalization" to embracing the distinctiveness and spiritual nature of Jewish life and statehood.

Zionism 1.0 - Herzl's state of refuge

Herzl prophetically predicted in his diary entry at the inaugural World Zionist Congress in 1897 that a Jewish state would be founded within 50 years. Remarkably, almost exactly half a century later in 1948, a sovereign Jewish state was established, and has been going strong for almost 80 years, with half the world's Jews living there and functioning as an impressive first-world country and regional superpower.

As accurate as Herzl's prediction about the timing of Jewish statehood was, he was equally wrong about another. Herzl articulates clearly in his influential 1896 publication *Der Judenstaat* - The Jewish State - that Zionism would be a winning solution to the virulent antisemitism of his time, the "Jewish question" of prejudice and persecution, as it was termed in the 19th century. His solution was straightforward: establish a Jewish state that would serve as a safe refuge for the Jewish collective, a place where Jews could finally live among their own, be accepted as equals, and achieve "normalization," safety, and security like all other nations.

Totally logical and rational. Totally wrong.

Israel has barely had a single safe and normal day in its 78 years of existence. The day after it was founded, the one-day-old state was attacked by seven neighboring

armies. Over the following 25 years, it fought three regional wars against neighbors determined to destroy it. In 1979, Israel finally achieved peace with Egypt - its largest and most dangerous neighbor - only for that same year to bring the Islamic revolution in Iran, whose regime has been plotting Israel's destruction ever since, despite having no territorial disputes with Israel and no geopolitical grievances against it.

Despite multiple attempts at peaceful coexistence with the Palestinians - the Oslo Accords and the Gaza Disengagement - Israel continued to face deadly terror attacks on a daily basis, intifadas, and missile barrages from Gaza, along with flat-out Palestinian and radical Islamic rejectionism of any Jewish state anywhere between the river and the sea.

No matter what Israel has done, "normalization" - feeling safe and secure within our borders in Israel and within Jewish communities around the globe - remains mysteriously elusive. Almost without fail, every Jewish community institution around the globe faces ongoing threats.

If there was any doubt about this before October 7th, there is none today. As the war against Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Ayatollah's Iranian regime continues now for two-and-a-half years, the virus of antisemitism in its modern incarnation of anti-Zionism has broken out around the world like a contagion - no longer hatred of Judaism or the Jewish people, but now of Israel and Jewish statehood, plain and simple. As Israel battles to secure itself against the annihilationist threats of a



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potentially nuclear Iran, voices from the liberal left and now the MAGA right are joining in the delegitimization of Israel's very right to exist and defend itself.

If in the 1930s, at a time of Jewish statelessness, antisemites shouted "Jews, get out of Germany and go to Palestine where you came from," astoundingly, today's antisemites shout "Jews, get out of Palestine and go back to where you came from."

Despite being a regional superpower, the safety and security of Israel and Jewish communities around the world remain threatened. It is difficult to escape a sense of uncertainty and vulnerability about the Jewish condition.

Crises, though, always beget an opportunity for reevaluation and renewal.

From political opposition to spiritual opportunity

I believe that the great challenge of vitriolic opposition to Jewish statehood in Israel presents a remarkable opportunity – to dig deeper into the historic mission of Jewish statehood. The answer to this conundrum does not lie in the area of geopolitics alone, but is rooted in the realm of metaphysics, in the very uniqueness of Jewish destiny.

There is nothing normal about Jewish existence, and there never has been. No other people has survived the collapse of every empire that exiled them, or thrived under conditions that would have erased any other nation. The standard categories simply don't fit: Jews are not merely a religion, nor merely an ethnicity, nor merely a nation, but a singular combination of all of these, bound to a specific land and charged with a universal mission. Any attempt to reduce Jewish or Zionist identity to just one of these elements – stripping away the spiritual core – misses the very essence of what the Jewish people are and what they are here to do.

Through the prism of spiritual Zionism, it is critical to acknowledge that Zionism did not begin with Herzl, or even with bygone eras of Jewish history. Rather, it began with the very first Jew, Avraham – with G-d's very first interaction with him. The verses describing this encounter capture the very essence and beauty of this unique and complex spiritual mission, and the centrality of Israel to its success: "Hashem said to Avram, 'Go forth from your country, your birthplace and your father's household to the Land that I will show you. I will

make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (*Bereishit* 12:1-3).

It is telling that in G-d's first conversation with the very first Jew, he is commanded to journey to a land – and there to become a great nation whose purpose extends beyond itself, to be a source of blessing to all humanity. That is the source of both Judaism and Zionism. That is the mission. That is spiritual Zionism.

Perhaps it is time now for Zionism to evolve from a primarily secular, security-based political framework toward a spiritually rooted Jewish society – one that reflects the deeper purpose of this Jewish mission. Not, Heaven forbid, through any religious coercion, but through spiritual inclusiveness in the true sense of the pleasant and sweet paths of the Torah (*Mishlei* 17:3).

A spiritually-based Zionism does not reject the remarkable achievements of secular Zionism; rather, it embraces them as part of a process of spiritual renewal – first a physical redemption, followed by a spiritual one, a complementary integrated whole. Yechezkel clearly articulates this dual process: "For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you" (*Yechezkel* 36:24-26).

The physical return and rebuilding of the Land is part of a larger spiritual revival. Once the foundations of statehood are secured, the deeper spiritual soul of the nation will gradually reawaken.

The War of Rebirth

Perhaps this is the greatest opportunity of this war since October 7th, aptly named by the government *Milchemet HaTekuma*, the War of Rebirth, or Renewal.

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook emphasized in 1920 how the Zionist endeavor must become not merely a refuge or a political structure but a vessel for the unfolding of Jewish spiritual destiny: "The renewal of our people must be a complete renewal – of the body and the soul, of the secular and the sacred. Furthermore, the

purpose of secular national renewal is only to bring us the renewal of the soul, the renewal of the sacred."¹

This edition of *HaMizrachi* is dedicated to exploring the spiritual roots and vision of Zionism.

The founders of political Zionism accomplished the extraordinary task of restoring Jewish sovereignty. The challenge of the present generation is different. It is to infuse that sovereignty with the spiritual depth, ethical vision, and covenantal consciousness that have always defined the Jewish people. In doing so, Zionism will evolve from a movement of national survival into a project of spiritual renewal.

Fascinatingly, Herzl himself intuited that political Zionism is inherently linked to a spiritual destiny. It is exactly on this note that he concludes his 1902 utopian novel *Altneuland*. The different characters in Herzl's imagined future state each express what they feel is the driving force of the new sovereign entity – be it suffering, technology, knowledge, or willpower, among other suggestions. After each has given their view, the book ends with the words of the final protagonist, Rabbi Shmuel: "But the venerable Rabbi Shmuel arose and proclaimed: G-d."²

1. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook, *Ma'amrei Hare'aya* 336, "Renewal of the Sacred – a Complete Renewal".
2. Herzl is referring here to one of two Rabbi Shmuels whom he knew well and worked closely with: Rabbi Shmuel Mohliver, founder of the Mizrachi branch of Chibbat Zion, or Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, one of the founders and leaders of the Mizrachi of Rabbi Reines.



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