

What's the difference between an outlaw from the Wild West and a rabbi who gives a sermon about Israel? Only the outlaw is wanted dead or alive!

Rabbis are warned, in seminary, about the *perils* of Israel sermons. Congregants hold such divergent yet passionate positions about Israel that it's virtually *impossible* to say anything without ruffling feathers. And that's on a normal Shabbat morning. Giving a sermon about Israel on Yom Kippur? That's downright *meshugena*!

So why am I discussing Israel and Zionism today? Because I've focused on, wrestled with, worried about, and cried over Israel pretty much *every* single day for the past year. There is no subject—outside of my family—that has mattered *more* to me this year. So I feel compelled to share with you, from the heart, a few of my thoughts.

Last spring, I attended Admitted Students' Day at Columbia with my son. It should have been a joyous occasion; a chance for me to show off the school I loved and celebrate the opportunity he now had. Instead, it felt like we entered a war zone. Pro-Palestinian activists had taken over the campus to such an extent that we were quarantined inside the student center. The lawn was awash in students wearing kafiyyahs and carrying signs filled with anti-Zionist propaganda. Visits to dorms and campus tours were canceled because the administrators couldn't guarantee our safety. My son and I slipped out at one point and tried to engage a couple of the protesters in conversation, but we found them to be little more than parrots—capable of regurgitating the lines they had been taught but knowing nothing about Hamas' atrocities, let alone the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Had we met someone open to an in depth conversation, *this* is what I would have liked to share with them:

To begin with, Zionism is the right of the Jewish people to have sovereignty in our ancestral homeland. And the Land of Israel is our ancestral homeland. We have been connected to Eretz Yisrael, to the land of Israel, from the moment the patriarch Abraham left Mesopotamia and ventured forth, in Genesis 12, to the Promised Land. Ever since, the Land of Israel has been inextricable from our Jewish identity. The Torah's central narrative is the Israelites' journey from slavery in Egypt towards redemption in Canaan, in the land that would become Israel. There are

at least 26 *different* mitzvot in the Torah that can only be fulfilled in the Land of Israel. Our cycle of holidays is based on the agricultural conditions in Israel. We face east when we pray because that is the direction of Jerusalem. Despite 2000 years of exile, we never severed our emotional and spiritual ties to Israel. This is why we declare “Next year in Jerusalem” at the end of every Passover Seder.

This deep, visceral bond with Eretz Yisrael debunks the ignorant, or more often malicious, claims that Israel is a product of what’s called “settler colonialism.” Settler colonialism tries to discredit certain countries, such as the US or Australia, that were established by settlers who displaced their native populations. The scholar [Jonathan Chait](#) explains that settler colonialism “delegitimizes its targets without offering a workable program for replacing them” since there is no practical way to undo the past. The *only* place where activists use this theory to seek real world success is with Israel. But this academic framework cannot apply to Israel without erasing our 3000 plus year connection to Eretz Yisrael. By denying the reality that Israel is the only land to which we are indigenous. This reality, Chait writes, is behind the settler colonial agenda—denying Jewish Israelis the right to live in Israel, when Jews also lack connection to any other soil, means that Jews must remain permanently rootless. The point is not to find an alternative home for Jews; it is to leave us stateless and adrift.

Forming a national homeland for the Jewish people is, to the contrary, the just and legal extension of our right to self-determination. International law holds that all people have the right to self-determination, to “freely pursue their [political,] economic, social, and cultural development in their place of national origin.” (ICCPR, Part 1, Article 1) The political philosophy which *actualizes* people’s collective right to self-determination is called nationalism. As empires crumbled during the 19th and early 20th centuries, a groundswell of nationalist movements emerged. On August 29, 1897, Theodor Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. This Congress called for establishing a publicly and legally assured home for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel. Zionism is the Jewish expression of nationalism, our national liberation movement. In this vein, Zionism is no different from all other 19th and 20th century nationalist movements that produced new countries. Any efforts to single out Zionism from these other expressions of nationalism is precisely the type of double standard that

constitutes textbook antisemitism. Our desire for self-determination is as legitimate as the desires of all other peoples.

But there actually is one fundamental difference when it comes to Jewish nationalism: without sovereignty, we know we never will be safe. Our history of persecution and betrayal demonstrates that we can never trust our security and well-being to others. Since the Romans cast us into exile nearly 2000 years ago, we perpetually have been subject to the fickle and arbitrary whims of foreign rulers.

Zionism represented a paradigm shift in our view of the world and our place within it. Herzl realized, after chronicling the Dreyfus trial in France, that the only solution to the problem of Jewish vulnerability and exploitation was to create a Jewish state. Through Zionism, if we wanted to change our exilic condition, we didn't have to wait for a miracle. We could create that miracle ourselves. By getting our hands dirty, working the land, forming a military, and mastering whatever diplomacy was necessary, Herzl said, we could build a viable state; we could control our own fate.

This shift was so audacious, this dream of creating a modern state of Israel so impossible, that the only people crazy enough to try it were Jews who felt they had nowhere else to go. When Earl Harrison, a deputy to President Truman, visited Jews stuck in DP camps after the Holocaust, he asked them where they wanted to go. 90% said Israel. When he asked them where they were willing to go other than Israel, they answered... the crematorium. After the trauma of the Shoah, if they couldn't go to the *one* place they felt they would be protected, they thought there was no reason to go on living.

Today, Israel continues to be essential as a safe haven for Jews. As we experienced on October 7th, our enemies have no compunction about trying to exterminate us. We need to take Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and other extremists at their word. When they call for the end of the "Zionist entity," or chant "from the river to the sea Palestine will be free," their goal is to destroy Israel and ethnically cleanse the seven million Jews in our homeland, not to promote a 2 state solution

or foster coexistence. There isn't a single Palestinian faction—from Hamas to the Palestinian Authority—that accepts the legitimacy of a Jewish state in any capacity, using any borders.

Zionism could not prevent October 7th. But what the existence of the State of Israel enabled, was October 8th. Throughout our history, when we were attacked, we were left to pick up the pieces and rebuild, but we could never fight back. No previous Jewish community had an IDF. That's what makes Israel so special. Zionism is the *answer* to the cycles of dependence and vulnerability that plagued us for millenia; it means we have agency over our lives and our well-being.

The truth is, as Dara Horn discusses in her book "People Love Dead Jews," many people in the world today are uncomfortable with the idea of Jews having power and agency. There may be expressions of support and empathy when we seem weak, when we're persecuted. But, as Golda Meir once said, the world doesn't like the Jew who hits back. This is the by-product of *centuries* of theological antisemitism. Saint Augustine, an early Catholic leader, helped spread a theory of Jewish Witness that Jews needed to remain alive, in a persecuted and lowly state within Christendom, to attest to the supersession of Judaism by the Church. Our weakness was proof of Christianity's truth. Relatedly, Islam has focused, since its inception, on subjugating Jews. The eighth-century Pact of 'Umar codified the idea that Jews and other "People of the Book" would be allowed to remain alive under Muslim rule only as dhimmis, as people who were to be debased and persecuted as second-class citizens. This remained Jews' reality *whenever* we were forced to live under Christian or Muslim rule.

Today this virulent opposition to Jewish autonomy is projected onto Israel. Israel has become the "Jew among the nations." Just as antisemitism seeks to target individual Jews, anti-Zionism seeks to exclude Jews collectively from the international community. Israel cannot be strong and independent, accepted as an equal_nation rather than as a pariah, because *admitting* such a reality is anathema to the bigoted and antisemitic worldview so many still hold. The truth is, if others can't accept the idea of Jews with power, that is their antisemitism, not our burden, to carry.

Now I want to dive a little deeper. Beyond celebrating Israel's right to exist as the Jewish national homeland, what else does Zionism call for? What does it *actually* mean when we claim to be pro-Israel?

It turns out, there is no such thing as a universal definition of Zionism. Instead, there are a number of strands of Zionism, each competing with and influencing each other. Herzl's Political Zionism focused on the idea that the Jews were a people, not just a religion, and deserved the same self-determination rights as the rest of Europe; but it didn't advocate for a particular political orientation. Labor Zionism saw Political Zionism as a start, but not the end, of the Zionist journey. Labor Zionists like Ben Gurion and Golda Meir wanted a Jewish working class settling in Israel and creating an egalitarian, cooperative society through kibbutzim and agricultural connection. Revisionist Zionism, led by Ze'ev Jabotinsky and later Menachem Begin, sought a "revision" of Labor Zionism that would expand the geography of Eretz Yisrael and reject Labor's socialist vision. Religious Zionism, led by thinkers such as Rav Kook, viewed Israel as the *only* place where Jews could develop to their full potential, and saw Eretz Yisrael as *inseparable* from the soul of the Jewish people. These varieties of Zionism also were impacted by Cultural Zionism, founded by Ahad Ha'am, who believed that the purpose of Zionism was to create a spiritual center for the flourishing of Jewish culture through Hebrew language, literature, music, and art. Meanwhile, Diaspora Zionism emerged from Americans such as Justice Louis Brandeis and Hadassah founder Henrietta Szold as a blend of patriotism to countries Jews called home with support for Jewish nationalism in Israel.

The reason I have shared all these varieties of Zionism with you today is not only to teach about Zionism's origins, but also to explain why being pro-Israel does not lead, inexorably, to a single vision of Zionism. Zionists before and after Israel's creation have argued and fought vociferously over these competing narratives. The author Gil Troy writes that "The early Zionist movement was indeed a many-splendored thing: a rollicking conversation synthesizing Judaism, nationalism, liberalism, idealism, rationalism, socialism, and capitalism." ("The Zionist Ideas: Visions for the Jewish Homeland — Then, Now, Tomorrow")

In reality, we have needed a blend of these approaches for Zionism to prosper. Early Labor and other secular Zionists took the lead in a project religious Zionists never would have begun; yet kibbutzniks and cultural Zionists lacked the realpolitik and messiness required to bring a state into being. At the same time, raw political Zionism lacked the soul, the spiritual depth, of what makes Israel special as a state. Israel has thrived when these multiple Zionisms engage with one another and enable a fusion to emerge. This clash of Zionisms persists today. In fact, elections for the next World Zionist Congress begin this March, and Or Hadash is supporting the Conservative Movement's Mercaz slate. You can learn more about this campaign on these cards I've left by the registration tables.

What this means, to me, is that criticism is healthy, and necessary, for a robust concept of Zionism. Criticism, in Judaism, is not a sin. Criticism is a mitzvah! Leviticus 19:17 demands of us, "*hokhiakh tokhiach et amitecha*"--you shall surely rebuke your neighbor. Why? We care about how our neighbors act because we are responsible to help one another grow morally and spiritually.

The mitzvah of rebuke comes one line, just one line, before perhaps the most famous mitzvah of interpersonal relations in the Torah--"*ve'ahvta l're'echa kamocho*"--love your neighbor as yourself. We can't love our neighbors, or our fellow Jews, if we aren't willing to be honest with one another. The purpose of this mitzvah of criticism is not for us to feel self-righteous in calling out others. It isn't about retribution, vindication, or scoring political points. The *purpose* is to create a society, as R. Donniel Hartman writes, "in which social criticism is seen as an essential part of developing a morally and spiritually excellent people."

When it comes to offering critiques of Israel, I believe they must be offered constructively and lovingly. Especially when Israel is at war. Our role, as American Jews who do not vote in Israel, do not pay taxes in Israel, and do not serve in the IDF, should never be to tell Israel what it should do. Instead, our role is to share with our brothers and sisters in Israel our suggestions, to let Israelis encounter our ideas, and occasional concerns, and then decide for themselves what to do. Being removed from the existential reality of living as Israelis, we have the privilege of offering an outsider perspective that otherwise might not gain sufficient traction in Israel itself.

Supporting Israel unequivocally against existential threats to its security does not preclude us from also weighing in on non-existential actions. If expressing our love for Israel demands that we stay silent when we feel its policies conflict with our aspirations for Israel's future, then aren't we violating the very mitzvah of rebuke that Leviticus insists is obligatory? If we care about Zionism, if we care about Israel's long-term viability and success, then our voice also matters!

The version of Zionism I currently find most resonant is Doniell Hartman's articulation of a "troubled committed Zionist." Now, before you start worrying that the fasting is getting to me, let me explain what troubled and committed mean! I am unconditionally committed to Israel's survival, and I am committed to supporting those in Israel building a Jewish and democratic homeland that lives up to the values expressed in Israel's Declaration of Independence.

I am troubled because, in Hartman's words, "To be a Jew is to be troubled, to view one's life, and one's society, through an aspirational lens, always striving to be more. I'm troubled by the enduring gap between ideals and reality."

Beyond Hartman's definition, I also am troubled by the rise of ultranationalist religious Zionists in Israel, represented by Smotrich and Ben Gvir. They espouse a hateful strain of Kahanism that seeks to undermine Israel's democratic character and encourage extrajudicial terror. I also am troubled by the demographic and political ascendancy of the Haredi ultra-orthodox community in Israel which continues to resist participation in the IDF or civil service, refuses to contribute economically to Israel's well being, yet extracts significant state resources for social services and blocks political efforts to foster religious pluralism. And I am troubled by the excruciating impossibility of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To quote from Hartman once more, "Even though I'd like Israel ... to bring the occupation to an immediate end, I believe that in doing so Israel will cease to exist."

I also readily recognize that you might have a different calculus for your understanding of Zionism. Some might be more or less troubled by these or other factors.

I yearn for a Zionism that can be a Beit Midrash which permits a rigorous partnership between Israelis and world Jewry. Our duty as a Jewish people, today, is to find ways to make space in our consciousness for all Zionists to be part of our conversation.

What we cannot do, as a people, is continue an alarming trend of *sinat hinam*, of internal hatred, against those in the Jewish community with whom we disagree. We cannot demonize or castigate fellow Jews for holding different Zionist stances than we do. We rush to brand critics, especially from younger generations, as antisemitic rather than engaging them through the content of their criticisms. On this Yom Kippur, as we atone for our individual and collective sins this past year, perhaps we need to include some soul searching about our responsibility for contributing to intra-Jewish hostility through our words or actions. How might we be complicit in amplifying *sinat hinam*?

Last month, the [Department of Justice announced](#) that it had uncovered a massive scheme by the Russian government to spread misinformation online, including within the Jewish community. Russian troll farms created a scheme pitting Jewish liberals and conservatives against each other. To what extent have we aided our enemies by forwarding a false article or sharing a fake Facebook post? And what can we do, in the coming year, to avoid being lulled into a self-righteousness that puts polemics before peoplehood?

We can turn the tide against *sinat hinam*, against the endless litmus tests and ad hominem attacks over pro-Israel credentials, when we pivot to a perspective of *ahavat hinam*, of baseless love. (Rav Kook, Orot HaKodesh (vol. III, p. 324)) We are a people, not a political party. As a people, we must recognize everyone who wants to be part of that peoplehood. Both progressive and conservative supporters of Israel deserve legitimacy within a big tent of Zionism. Even if we disagree over specific government policies in Israel, we must embrace a spirit of solidarity. *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba'zeh*—we are all responsible for the well being of one another.

We must strive to build the biggest possible tent to welcome everyone who supports Israel's right to exist as a Jewish national homeland. A tent that isn't beholden to partisan politics. We must take advantage of a unique reshuffling that has taken place since October 7th within the Jewish

community. As Yehuda Kurtzer notes in a recent essay, we have seen, in the past year, that “the messy mainstream of American Jews is energized anew toward identification with Israel and the Jewish people... with levels of belonging that represent a reversal of decades of assimilation and decline, and coalescing back into a big tent.”

At the same time, the American Jewish Left has chosen to identify with the pro-Palestinian, anti-Zionist cause rather than seek a home within the mainstream Jewish community. Any communal tent must have red lines to demarcate who stands outside the tent entrance and who finds shelter within. The Jewish community must differentiate between those who actively seek our destruction and those who, out of ignorance or susceptibility to persuasion, have gone along with a cause they don't actually understand or support. Those willing to renounce the rank hatred and bigotry of anti-Zionism, to educate themselves about Zionism, are welcome to enter this tent. After all, the stronger the presence within the tent, the stronger response we can generate against those who choose to stand outside of it.

Israelis have come together since October 7th in ways unimaginable on October 6th. The country had been torn apart for the better part of a year over Netanyahu's proposed judicial reform measures. Israelis relearned on 10/7 that what they have in common is ultimately more important than what keeps them apart. We, as Diaspora Zionists, need to relearn this lesson as well.

We have spent time discussing why we should embrace Zionism and how to approach Zionism from a big tent perspective. Now I want to shed light on one more central element of Zionism. Zionism, at its core, is dynamic and ever-shifting, rather than a static set of beliefs.

Zionism is predicated on the audacious rejection of the past and a refusal to be limited by the present. The word for this state of mind in Hebrew is *halutziyut*. *Halutz* means a pioneer. Turned into a verb, *l'haletz* means to extricate oneself from an unacceptable reality. Zionism is about disrupting the status quo and pioneering ahead to build a radically different future. Zionism is the actualization of our wildest dreams; the political manifestation of our imagination. It demands that we use our agency to define who we are for ourselves.

Unfortunately, ever since the failure of the Oslo Accords, the pain and fear of the Second Intifada, and the disastrous fallout of Israel's 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, many Israelis stopped dreaming. They remained committed to the Zionist enterprise and the survival of Israel, but no longer were troubled by questions about the Palestinians or by disparities between Israel as it is and Israel as it might be. Israel's leaders stopped talking about what they wanted for the future. Instead, they doubled down on protecting and maintaining the status quo.

This war has crystallized the need for Israel to recapture the aspirational lens of Zionism. If Israelis don't ask questions about who they want to become, they won't escape their present wartime mentality, even after, God willing, the remaining hostages are rescued and the threat from Hamas is resolved. Israel cannot thrive if it merely seeks to be a fortress of protection for Jews. We need a day after plan not only for the Gaza War, but for the State of Israel as a whole.

A few weeks ago, I was blessed to attend the wedding of my nephew in Israel. Under the chuppah, the rabbi officiating the wedding gave an insightful speech about breaking the glass at the end of the ceremony. He explained that the rabbis of the Talmud had two different words for connoting strength. *Koach*, which means power, refers to how much strength you have to prevail over your opponent. *Gevurah*, which means heroism, is manifested when using strength as a means to protect or restore life. We can break the glass at the end of the wedding with destructive, crushing *koach*, or with regenerative *gevurah*. Both will work. But the effect on those impacted by the breaking will be quite different.

The same is true for Israel. It can choose a strength that enables it to prevail in the moment by crushing its enemies while also obliterating everything around it, or it can choose a strength that enables it to cultivate and grow our greatest Zionist ambitions. A Zionism that returns Israel from the people of the status quo to the people of dreams. The work of Zionism is not yet done, and as lovers of Israel, we, too, have a role to play both in helping Israel to win this war and in helping it to fill a moral and spiritual vision for tomorrow.

A Zionism that is about loyalty but not imagination, about preserving the status quo without an aspiring vision for the future, is not good enough. Zionism is capable of so much more.

Zionism, at its core, is a medium for hope. As the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks [wrote](#) in his book [To Heal a Fractured World](#):

“Religious faith is not... a matter of seeing the world as we would like it to be, and then believing that mere wishing or praying will make it so. God never promised that the world would get better of its own accord. Faith means seeing the world exactly as it is and yet not giving up the belief that it could be otherwise, if we are ready to act with others to make it so. Faith is realism that has been touched by hope. And hope has the power to transform the world.”

There is a reason why the Torah cycle we read every year never concludes with the Israelites’ arrival in the Promised Land. Why the Book of Deuteronomy ends with the Israelites still on the cusp of entering Canaan, the journey not yet completed. Judaism teaches, in so many ways, that the world is not yet as it could be, not yet as God yearns for it to become; and we, too, are not yet who we might become. Hope is the connective tissue between the not-yet redeemed world and the world we aspire to build.

Perhaps nothing embodies this Jewish celebration of hope, of accepting the mantle of “not yet,” more than Hatikvah, Israel’s national anthem. [Hatikvah originated](#) as a poem written in 1878 by the Ukrainian poet, Naftali Herz Imber, entitled “Tikvateinu,” “our hope.” His poem became popular and was set to music, and by 1933, “Hatikvah” became the anthem of the Zionist movement. The heart of Hatikvah is the phrase: “*Od lo avdah tikvateinu*. Our hope is not yet lost.” The phrase is actually a radical reinterpretation of a passage from Ezekiel Chapter 37. Ezekiel prophesies about seeing a valley of dry bones, with the cadavers crying out, “*avdah tikvateinu*”--our hope is lost!

Imber deliberately subverted the text. By writing “*Od lo avdah tikvateinu*- Our hope is not yet lost,” Imber asserted that hope is possible right now. And that we, the Jewish people, have the agency and capacity to redeem ourselves and to become a free people in the land of Zion and Jerusalem. At the same time, Imber does not sugarcoat the reality of the moment. Hatikvah is not the anthem of a people who already have been redeemed, but of a people actively yearning for redemption. Even after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, even today, redemption is not yet at hand. But the hope in this redemption remains palpable.

So, today, let us re-affirm our pride in Zionism. Let us celebrate the miracle that is Israel without apology or equivocation. Let us reject the false dichotomies others set up for us and call out pro-Palestinian zealots wherever they fulminate their voices of hate.

At the same time, let us continue to make the positive case for Zionism in spaces where we think others are ignorant as opposed to antisemitic. Most people are Ahashverosh, not Haman. Most are ignorant. This is our Queen Esther moment to spend our social capital, as uncomfortable as that might feel. Let us explain why those who support democracy, female empowerment, and civil rights should stand with us rather than against us.

Let us commit to growing a big tent Zionism. A tent in which healthy dispute is welcome and we advocate for our views in ways that promote *ahavat hinam* rather than *sinat hinam*. A tent in which those who don't yet know which blend of Zionism feels right can learn and explore different approaches until they locate seats within the tent where they feel most at home.

And let us continue to strive for a Zionism that is aspirational and insists on hope. A hopeless Jewish people is an oxymoron. A hopeless Zionism is an oxymoron. May we never give up hope, for ourselves, for Israel, or for the Jewish people. As an affirmation of this spirit of hope, I invite you to rise and join me in singing Hatikvah together.