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SOME THOUGHTS ON LIBERAL ZIONISM

This week, we observed two distinct days on the Jewish calendar—Yom HaZikaron-Israel's Memorial Day for fallen soldiers and Yom Ha-Atzmaut\Israel Independence Day—75 years of a Jewish State.

This week, I also read the following statement\question from a member of our Micah community:

“I'm struggling with the concept of "Liberal Zionism" espoused by Rabbi Zemel and other members of the clergy. I really don't understand what that means and whether it is possible to support the idea of a Jewish homeland that is not inexorably linked to the exclusion and subjugation of non-Jews within and adjacent to Israel's borders. I'm beginning to feel like "Liberal Zionism" (whatever this is) is being put forth as doctrine and not as a topic for constructive debate or discussion.”

I would like to try this evening for a constructive response that might engage further discussion for, I believe, it to be a kind of question that lurks, frequently, unformed in the corner of many of us. Even as I give this response this evening, I know that it is incomplete. A more thorough response would have to include a full history of Zionism going back to the 19th century and I am not sure that anyone wishes to sit here for that long.

To begin-

Zionism was meant to solve the Jewish problem of Europe—a problem that reached its crescendo in Nazi Germany’s Final Solution. The problem has not gone away. Just consider the murderous pogroms in Poland after the war—let that sink in—after the war--- and the silencing in Poland today by edict and law of the teaching about Poland’s complicity with the murder of Jews while under Nazi rule and in the years following.

The Jewish problem is alive and too well.

Let us begin then with November, 1947 and the UN vote to partition Palestine into two separate entities—Jewish and Palestinian Arab. It was at that moment that Israel’s War of Independence began with the Palestinian Arabs launching immediate attacks against the Jewish population in Palestine.

Six months later in accordance with the partition plan in, May, 1948 the British Army, which had nominally and largely unsuccessfully kept a lid on the war, left Palestine altogether. Ben Gurion as chairman of the Jewish Agency for Palestine declared Israeli statehood. The new Jewish state was immediately invaded by Five Arab armies who joined the Palestinian Arabs in their fight against the now newly declared Jewish state.

This is all historical record.

Israel, emerged victorious in its War of Independence and now to quote Israeli historian Anita Shapira:

“The war’s biggest losers were the Palestinians. By war’s end about 700,000 had been exiled from their homeland.” (*Israel, A History*, p174)

Many had fled, many had been forcibly removed by Israeli soldiers, many left at the beckoning of the surrounding Arab leaders who urged them to get out of the way of their invading armies with the assurance of return after their defeat of Israel.

War is ugly. Wars create refugees. This war was no exception.

To return to Anita Shapira:

“In the context of the time, Israeli policy on the refugee issue was not considered out of the ordinary. It was only three years since the end of World War Two...the conclusion of that war had involved massive population movements. Fixing the Poland-Germany border...mandated the expulsion of some eight million Germans to the west. Territories in what had been eastern Poland were transferred to the Russians...the Polish population was either expelled or forced to flee... Czechoslovakia dispossessed three million Germans in the Sudentanland, who were forced to flee the country. Removing hostile elements...and creating ethnic homogeneity in Eastern and Central Europe were considered appropriate responses...The Israeli leadership saw itself confronting precisely the same situation. The Palestinians had caused the war and now they bore its consequences. Decreasing the Arab minority in Israel was considered a natural outcome of the Palestinians open hostility to the state. Moreover, just as Germany had absorbed the German refugees from the east, and Poland had absorbed the Polish refugees, there seemed no reason why the Arab states should not absorb the Palestinian refugees.”

Shapira concludes this section:

“As it turned out, however, of all the refugees created in the second half of the 1940s, the Palestinians were the only ones not absorbed by the countries where they lived. Thus they became a permanent problem in the Middle East.” (p175)

I highly recommend the Shapira book.

Now to quote Ari Shavit with just a slightly different take on the same matter:

“from the beginning Zionism skated on thin ice. On the one hand it was a national liberation movement, but on the other it was a colonialist enterprise. It intended to save the lives of one people by the dispossession of another. In its first fifty years, Zionism was aware of this complexity and acted accordingly. It was very careful not to be associated with colonialism and tried very hard not to cause unnecessary hardship. It made sure it was a democratic, progressive, and enlightened movement, collaborating with the world’s forces of progress. With great sophistication Zionism handled the contradiction at its core. It managed to arrive at the great war of 1948 just and strong and came out of the war with a Jewish democratic nation-state that had clear borders and a massive Jewish majority. It had turned the conflict between an emigrant community and a native population into a conflict between sovereign states. Gone was the danger...that Zionism would be perceived as just another ill-conceived colonial project.” (*My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Zionism*)

This was Zionism from 1881-1947—which meticulously purchased all land it settled on. To be sure, the land owners were frequently absentee but the Zionist project of settlement was purchasing land in Palestine to build Jewish communities—primarily Jews who were seeking to escape the deep anti-Semitism of Europe.

From 1948-1977, the essential Zionist project was to maintain a huge Jewish majority in the original borders of the State. By the 1960's the Arab population in Israel proper were made full citizens with full voting rights.

In the early years after 1967's Six Day war there was initially scant settlement and that was largely for security reasons. The Israelis were waiting for peace—land for peace—remember that phrase?

And then came 1977-2023—thirty-eight years of Likkud governments—eight years of non-Likkud have yielded what we have now—the growing settlement disaster motivated by a nightmare biblical theology of Greater Israel—the dream of the ultra-nationalist religious parties.

In his book, Shavit goes on to enumerate the absolute moral disaster of the settler project of the West Bank—saying the settlers were “wrong to think that a Sovereign state could do in occupied territories what a revolutionary movement can do in undefined land.” The settlers have “turned a conflict between nation states into a conflict between a settler community and an indigenous community.”

Come to Israel with me—and I will show you both the beauty of the Zionist dream as well as the ugliness of this settler nightmare.

Shavit ends this section of the book by calling the settler project “an act of historic suicide.”

Back to my question—who or what is a Liberal Zionist?

I want an Israel that is a Democratic State with full and equal rights for all of its citizens.

Final question—for a liberal Zionist, What makes the country Jewish?

The calendar—There is no problem—at least for me—with a country that sets its calendar according to the rhythm of the Jewish year and its seasons. Is not Christmas here a national holiday?

Language—let Hebrew and Arabic both be official languages —taught in the school system. A country where the radio stations are playing kol nidre and unetaneh tokef before Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, where the street names are biblical and figures from Jewish history. These need not exclude Muslim prayer melodies during Ramadan or Arabic street names and signs for great sites in Arab history.

Symbols—the Star of David on the flag? There are at least eleven countries in the European Union that feature a cross on their flags, and at least one that features the Muslim Crescent.

The National Anthem that speaks of the Jewish soul? No problem—write a second verse.

Finally- there is the Law of Return which gives citizenship to any Jew who seeks it. This is the nub. As a liberal Zionist, I would not relinquish that. If history has proven anything, it is that the world is a dangerous place for Jews.

25,000 Ukrainian refugees have entered Israel in the last year. Where would we have them live? Would this country take them in? How many of us would advocate for Ukrainian Jews while our southern border is teeming with a refugee crisis from Latin America?

I believe this in my soul—were it not for Israel, Jews today would still be living in refugee camps—possibly still from WW II-if you can imagine that.

A Liberal Zionist Israel would be the first to take in its share of refugees from other war torn areas. This would be an Israel that recognizes the moral responsibility of a Jewish state.

I defend liberal Zionism because I believe that an Israel within its original borders or those approximate to it can be a liberal Jewish and democratic state with equal rights for all its citizens—including any minority communities within the country.

To repeat Shavit's prophetic words- the settler project has become "an act of historic suicide" threatening the very character of the state as both Jewish and Democratic.

Israel is at a crossroads—

This is what we see playing out in Israel today—at this very moment.

This is the essential fight of liberal Zionism today.

What is Israel to be?

For me—

Od lo avda tikvatee

I have not yet lost my hope.

Shabbat Shalom-

