

## **Explaining Zionism—Yet Again (including to myself)**

*By Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel*

*Given January 12, 2024 | Washington, DC*

The headline size title of Benjamin's Moser's op-ed in last Sunday's Washington Post was "Anti-Zionism isn't the same as antisemitism." He then proceeds to give a history of the controversies and opposition that Zionism received within the Jewish world from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the rise of Nazi Germany.

We know this history well and we have discussed here many times as our own reform Judaism both in Europe and in the United States was antizionist. I quoted this extensively in my Rosh Hashanah sermon just a few months ago. Moser, of course, also covers the antiZionism of the Orthodox who were also very slow to come on board the Zionist movement. The only Orthodox rabbi of note to support Herzl's first Zionist conference was Rabbi Tzvi Mohliver. Moser is correct, the antizionist voices within world Jewry were many and strong.

They largely disappeared after 1945—largely but not entirely.

Moser gives short shrift and in fact ignores modern Israel's greatest political Zionist spokesperson—one of modern Israel's greatest writers, Amos Oz who died just over five years ago at the too young age of

seventy-nine. Too young—because we still need his voice today.

Moser summarizes his antizionist position in two sentences:

Antizionism, writes Moser, “is a rejection of the idea of ethnic nationalism. It is a rejection of the idea of citizenship tied to race.”

I have cited Oz’s response to this many times over the years increasingly over the last number of months. For me, this is a great re-statement of Herzl, the founder of what we call political Zionism—the notion that a Jewish state is the only answer to antisemitism.

Oz wrote:

“I would be more than happy to live in a world composed of dozens of civilizations, each developing in accordance with its own internal rhythm, all cross-pollinating one another, without any one emerging as a nation-state: no flag, no emblem, no passport, no anthem. No nothing. Only spiritual civilizations tied somehow to their lands, without the tools of statehood and without the instruments of war.

But the Jewish people has already staged a long running one-man show of that sort. The international audience sometimes applauded, sometimes threw stones, and occasionally slaughtered the actor. No one joined us; no one copied the model the Jews were forced to sustain for two thousand years, the model of a civilization without the “tools of

statehood.” For me this drama ended with the murder of Europe’s Jews by Hitler.

I am forced to take it upon myself to play the “game of nations,” with all the tools of statehood, even though it causes me to feel (as George Steiner put it) like an old man in a kindergarten. To play the game with an emblem, and a flag and a passport and an army, and even war, **provided that such war is an absolute existential necessity.** I accept those rules of the game because existence without the tools of statehood is a matter of mortal danger, but I accept them only up to this point.” (Amos Oz, *In the Land of Israel*, 1983)

I agree with Oz argument about the world being a dangerous place for Jews. History has proven that for me beyond a reasonable date. You don’t have to read the Passover Haggadah’s line, “V’he shamada la-voteinu vlanu omdim aleinu l’chaloteinu---In every generation they have risen up to destroy us.” Just try reading the history of the Crusades, the history of the Catholic church, or the history of Jews in the Middle East and North Africa.

After World War II, the world body known as the United Nations instituted an **Affirmative Action** program for world Jewry through the partition plan adopted in 1947 which allowed for the creation of the State of Israel.

I use the more contemporary term **affirmative action** deliberately. What is affirmative action except creating policies and a legal structure whereby those groups of people who have been harmed by deliberate and structural societal persecution will now be affirmatively assisted in order to overcome the discrimination they have endured for generations.

To be antizionist, therefore, for me, is to be against affirmative action—The theory behind them, as I see it, is one and the same. I am pro-affirmative action and I am a Zionist.

This brings me to further delve into Moser's critique.

We know that there are too many to count ethnic national states including —most of Europe

How many ethnic national states have, like Israel something akin to a Law of Return—that if you can show your ethnic lineage, you can gain automatic citizenship?

My limited research tells me the following--

Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Malaysia, Serbia, and Turkey.

Israel is not alone. My guess is that Mr. Moser is against them all.

In discussing this with a friend, he simply said—let the world form a line that ends all ethnic national states and Israel can enter the line in last place.

In terms of Israel's Law of Return, established in 1950, two years after statehood, there are, to be sure some particular challenges.

How does Israel decide who is a Jew and who therefore eligible to the granting of its citizenship benefit?

The case of Brother Daniel points out the challenges.

According to Israel's law of return, anyone born to a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism by a rabbi (including for overseas rabbis non-orthodox—in Israel only orthodox conversions are recognized.

What about people born Jewish who converted to another religion?

This was the famous case in Israel of Brother Daniel who was hidden during the Holocaust in a monastery, converted to Catholicism and then became a Carmelite Monk. In 1959, he moved to Israel, motivated by his Jewish birth and sought to claim citizenship under the laws of return. He was denied by citizenship by the Ministry of the interior. He appealed his case to the Israel supreme Court who also denied him the right of citizenship under the Law of Return. Their ruling said that someone who converted from being Jewish to another religion could not be considered Jewish "in the common parlance."

The noted (and much quoted in these parts) Israeli philosopher, Avishai Margalit, disagreed with the Court decision and made what he himself called an “outrageous” argument. As Michael Walzer (another much quoted thinker in these parts) summarizes Margalit:

“the idea of Israel as a refuge is the only ‘defensible rationale’ for the Law of Return. ...”no person could be turned down by the state of Israel who would have been persecuted by the Nazis.”

For Margalit therefore, Jewish status for purposes of the Law of Return and Israeli citizenship is determined by anti-Semites.

Margalit wrote:

“The long history of Jewish persecution with no sure refuge anywhere on earth...morally requires Israel to offer Jews everywhere an unconditional asylum.” If you are a Jew in the eyes of Nazis, you are entitled to citizenship in Israel.

I see this an underscoring of Amos Oz and for me, a definitive defense of Zionism and Israel.

I also consider this to represent a kind of moral obligation for Israel to be open, to the best of their abilities to refugees from other countries. It is the way to do honor to the affirmative action through which the State was created. Just over forty years ago, Israel was a model of this as they were one of the first countries to take in refugees –the so called

boat-people fleeing Vietnam following the collapse of the South Vietnamese government in 1975.

In more recent years, Israel's record with refugees from Eritrea and South Sudan has been spotty at best and disgraceful at worst.

There is more here to consider—because my Zionism is not only the Zionism of Herzl and Oz, it is also the Zionism of Ahad Ha'am and here too I wonder if Mr. Moser might consider how his own thinking is shaped.

Ahad Ha'am, a Russian Jew of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century who died in Tel Aviv in 1927 having lived the last five years of his life in pre-state Palestine, was not enamored about the creation of a state. Ahad Ha'am envisioned a Jewish cultural center. For him the diaspora was a spiritual disaster for Jews because we regarded ourselves as an "other," a perpetual outsider to the host country wherever we lived. We were the forever guest or foreigner. As such, we could not help but view ourselves through the eyes of the people amongst whom we lived. Ahad Ha'am's thinking about being a Jew in Europe rings with the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois about the experience of being Black in this country. I thought of Ahad Ha'am's Zionism when I read Ta Nehasi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, and the feeling of liberation he felt when he arrived as a student on the campus of Howard University.

The ability to see ourselves thru our own eyes can be an aspiration for which minorities are unaware until we experience it.

I think that we, American Jews, experience what Ahad Ha'am saw—especially, perhaps, we who consider ourselves on so many issues to be of the progressive liberal side of the dial.

We look at the pain and suffering and Gaza and are rightfully horrified. On this, I am with Mr. Moser and am no less pained. I cannot sleep on many a night.

I or, perhaps, many of us then look at the Left's total condemnation of Israel,

as if October 7 never happened,

as if Hamas is fighting a war for Palestinian independence,

as if rape and hostage taking of senior citizens and infants is simply sound military tactics,

as if the Fascist ideology of Hamas matters not a whit,

as if Israel is not fighting a war for its very survival

and

an end to this war leaving Hamas in power in Gaza is totally acceptable.

We then wonder—I know I do—are they right?

On so many other issues, issues that are vital to the future of this country-- they are my friends—gay rights, abortion rights, minority



rights, voting rights, public education, affirmative action, immigration, democracy.

Are they right on Israel?

I have to say that the Left is wrong. Hamas means what they say—they want to kill Jews and they wish to eliminate Israel as a state.

I am unable to stand with them on Israel.

No.

I think about this daily—am consumed with it moment by moment.

The war is horrible, the suffering in Gaza is real and Israel also faces, what I believe to be an existential threat. A country with no borders is no country. If no Israeli feels safe living on the Gaza border, the country is in effect no longer a country. Hamas has made its intentions clear. It will seek to attack again and again.

Ahad Haam speaks to me—to be in the diaspora is to look at yourself thru the eyes of others.

I believe that the American Jewish Zionist Left must mount in the most unified and muscular way that we can two unrelenting cries:

1- We say with Israelis—Save the hostages! Bring them home now.

The war must prioritize recuing the hostages among all else.

2- We say to Israel and anyone who will listen anywhere and everywhere-----Netanyahu and his despicable government must be brought down and the sooner the better. This is a man that is

anything but trustworthy and his government is a government of Jewish thugs, anarchists, authoritarians, religious zealots, and messianic fanatics. We cannot see what is happening clearly while this government stands. There must be a government now that has a sane and moral plan for the day after. This should be the unrelenting cry of the American Zionist camp.

I support Israel and its people—this government—never.

Until then, this war goes on-

fear for the hostages,

a government in Israel no same person can abide.

I stand by the sign I brought to the November rally on the Mall—

Hamas out of Gaza

Bibi out of Israel

Od lo avda tikvateinu

We have not yet lost our hope-

Shabbat shalom

