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David Novak

Excerpt

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Why Zionism?

Introduction

To be a Zionist is to be personally committed or loyal to the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish polity. There are many Zionists in the world today; most of them are Jews, but there are many non-Jewish Zionists too. Usually, one doesn't have to think of reasons for any such personal commitment, that is, when one's world is going along in its normal course, when it is "business as usual." Only when there are attempts to invalidate this personal commitment does one feel the need to react to the charges made against that personal commitment. When this happens, the first reaction is to protest by expressing personal outrage at the attempt to deny legitimacy to a personal commitment so close to one's heart. But surely, subjective reaction is not enough, especially when the attempt to invalidate such a personal commitment seems to be in the form of rational arguments against what a Zionist is actually committed to, which is to the Jewish State of Israel. When this happens, a Zionist needs to respond rationally by trying to articulate just *why* he or she is committed to the State of Israel, as this personal commitment is now being attacked with arguments (whether good or bad), not just with accusations.

To ask *why* one is committed to Israel is first to pose an ethical question to oneself – one that can be answered only by oneself

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for oneself. Rational persons need to justify to themselves and then to others why they do what they do.

A Zionist commitment is certainly under such an articulate attack here and now, perhaps as never before. Who could doubt that? That attack is not only military, not only economic, not only diplomatic. It is personal. Even if the attack is not addressed to someone personally, it still goes to the heart of a commitment that is close to a Zionist's identity as a person. It says a lot about *who* he or she is, that is, who is acting so passionately (as do many Zionists). Because this is a challenge for others like oneself, with whom one has something significant in common, the personal question is not only ethical; it also becomes political. The political question is: Why does the State of Israel have a claim on anybody's loyalty? This question, however, can be answered only by making good public arguments for why the Jewish state (*medinah yehudit*) in the land of Israel (*b'ere'ts yisra'el*) should have been founded originally; why it should exist here and now; and why it should continue to exist into the future. Only then can anyone understand why he or she should be personally committed to Israel. So, it is not just that one *wants* the State of Israel to exist because of his or her personal *desire* for it to exist. Rather, a person truly wants the State of Israel to exist because it has the *right* to exist, whether any individual person wants that or not. The matter is public, not private. One's desire that the State of Israel exist (and flourish) is not what legitimizes the state's existence; instead, the state's rightful existence legitimizes a person's desire that it should exist.

To talk of "rights" is to engage in political discourse inasmuch as the concept of *rights* is inherently political. But Israel's right to exist is not just a "diplomatic" case to be made to the external world; it is a *personal* case to be made to oneself first and foremost. Yet this personal case is not something one makes as an individual based on his or her own subjective motives. Rather, this personal case is communal: it is the claim of a community of persons (plural). This *personall/communal* claim must be made prior to the external diplomatic case that is made to those outside one's own community. In fact, the external diplomatic case

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rings hollow unless the internal communal claim has been made intelligently and accepted beforehand. To the outside world, one makes the case that argues anonymously or universally: Israel's right to exist is the right of *any* nation to a state of *its* own in a land of its own. But, personally one must say: Israel's right to exist is the claim of the Jewish people to exist in *their* own state in their own land. How can one argue effectively for the right to live in a house if one doesn't have personal reasons for wanting to live in *this* house? That is, what is it about this house that makes one want to live in it with one's own family? Why was this house built at all? These reasons are existential insofar as they are about what lies at the core of one's personal/communal existence. Surely, one needs to feel claimed by his or her community that is exercising its right over its members before one can make any communal claim on others. Minimally, that claim on others is the right not to be impeded by others in one's own existence or survival. Maximally, that right is the claim on others for assistance in one's own struggle for survival.

Political Rhetoric

Zionists who are politically astute know and have taught others how to deal with the anti-Zionist war against Israel's right to exist, or even Israel's right to have ever existed in the first place. To be sure, Zionist orators often invoke the emotional factors that motivate passion for Israel, though that seems to be more for rhetorical affect than to actually express any psychological insight. Nevertheless, Zionists are becoming more and more adept at getting beyond mere rhetoric by pointing to various international political agreements that make Israel's existence as a polity or nation-state among the nations (that is what "inter-national" means) an indisputable political fact, and that the burden of proof is on those who would deny that fact. Along these lines, the following political facts are cited: the Balfour Declaration of 1917, when the British Government recognized the right of the Jews to a "homeland" in Palestine; the San Remo Resolution of 1920 (ratified by the League of Nations

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in 1922) that internationally recognizes the right of the Jews to that homeland; the United Nations' partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab political spheres in 1947; the recognition of Israel by both the United States and the Soviet Union in 1948; the acceptance of the State of Israel into the United Nations as a member state in 1949; and the peace treaties between Israel and Egypt in 1979, and between Israel and Jordan in 1994.

All of these political facts are testimony that the right of the State of Israel to exist as a nation-state in the world has been recognized in one way or another by the world, that is, by others.¹ Yet, when it comes to the question of why Jews (and their friends) not only should recognize Israel's right to exist, but also should be personally or dutifully committed to Israel's existence, that is too often left to rhetoric rather than to reason. When Jews are at home among themselves, the emotional card is usually played. Pride in the courage and success of Israeli sisters and brothers in not only persevering, but also flourishing, is conjured up. Or, Jews conjure up their fear of what might happen to them if (God forbid!) they didn't have the military power of the State of Israel to protect them from their enemies, which is a fear that becomes intensified by memories of the time of the Holocaust when large numbers of Jews became "stateless," powerless, displaced persons, deprived of their political rights, even their right to life, and thus totally vulnerable to whoever would destroy them – and who almost did. Non-Jewish friends of the Jewish people – who are much more than diplomatic, economic, or political allies – very much resonate to these concerns.

Certainly, all of these emotional factors, which political rhetoric makes such good use of, are important. Who could deny that? Never underestimate the importance of psychological motivation. Without it, no person would desire to do anything

¹ Israel's *Declaration of Independence* (in Hebrew *megillat ha'atsma'ut*) says: "This recognition by the United Nations of the right of the Jewish people to establish their state is irrevocable ... Thus the members and representatives of the Jews of Palestine and of the Zionist movement ... hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in the land of Israel to be known as the State of Israel." (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israeli_Declaration_of_Independence#the_scroll)

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of personal significance. More than that, though, one certainly needs to know how to argue in terms of realpolitik against those who charge that Israel is a pariah state having no right to exist, now or ever. Politics in the usual sense employs the tactics of realpolitik, in which the best defense is often a good offense. Nevertheless, however necessary realpolitik and psychologically effective rhetoric are, neither of them or even both of them together is sufficient to inspire active Zionist commitment and sustain it intelligently. For that philosophy is needed – not philosophy as a detached view of the world from nowhere in particular, but rather philosophy as the search for the reasons or purposes that make what one does in the world something worthy of free, intelligent human persons. That is, one needs to ascertain the purposes that make his or her life, especially the communal life a person lives together with his or her own people, worthwhile. (Philosophers call that “teleology,” i.e., “speaking of ends or purposes.”)

As for political strategy, the nineteenth century Russian Jewish thinker Judah Leib Gordon was wrong when he famously counseled: “Be a Jew in your tent, but a human being [*ben adam*] when you depart from it.”² No! “Jewishness” should not be seen as a private particularity that Jews must leave back home when exercising their universal human rights publicly (in this case, the claim of *any* people on the world for a state of *their* own). Yet too many modern Jews did take Gordon’s advice to heart, becoming so enamored of the wider world that they couldn’t wait to depart from their “tent,” never wanting to come back to what they saw as the narrowness of the tent they wanted so desperately to escape from. However, contrary to Gordon and those who still think like him, Jews should see (and be seen by their friends) that their presence in the wider world is an integral

² This is from Gordon’s 1863 poem, “Awake My People!” The Hebrew original is found in *The Writings of Judah Leib Gordon: Poetry* [Heb.] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1956), 17–18. A full English translation of the entire poem is found in Michael Stanislawski, *For Whom Do I Toil? Judah Leib Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 50. For an astute historical analysis of the poem, see *ibid.*, 50–67.

aspect of their Jewishness, not a replacement for it altogether. Making one's political case *to* the world no doubt means there are times when one needs to be a proactive participant *in* the world, because no people can survive politically isolated *from* the world, especially in an age of globalization, whether militarily, economically, diplomatically, or intellectually. Nevertheless, Jews are still very much part of a higher – not lower – realm called “the house of Israel” (*bet yisrael*); and it is the realm to which Jews can and should regularly return because it is their true place in the world. Without it, Jews come from *nowhere* and more and more become anonymous *nobodies*, what used to be called “rootless cosmopolitans.”³

At this level, then, asking the question, “why be a Zionist?” is to ask the larger question “why be Jewish?” That question is more than a rhetorical one, for it assumes that not being a Zionist, or not being Jewish, is a real option in the world today, which it is. The notion that Jews simply *have to be* Zionists because the world will not let them be anything else, or Jews simply *have to be* Jews because the world will never let Jews forget the accident of their birth to Jewish parents, is simply not true. We certainly know that it is not true today, when even the worst enemies of the Jews are not checking individuals' ancestries like the Nazis did. The enemies of the Jews might be evil, but their evil is not the evil of genocidal racism – which, however, doesn't make the new threat of genocide from twenty-first-century enemies any less lethal though.

Political strategy, necessary as it no doubt is, does not give one *reasons* for being committed to the existence of Israel. Political strategy doesn't answer the question of why Israel itself ought to exist. It only enables one to counter the claims of enemies of the Jews that Israel should not be recognized as a nation-state in the international arena. In making this case, though, one doesn't have to look for reasons as to why he or she should be actively committed to Israel's existence, survival, and flourishing. One only needs to counter the charges of legal and political illegitimacy by

³ See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rootless_cosmopolitan

pointing to undeniable legal and political facts. This is like showing your notarized lease to somebody who denies you are the rightful tenant in your own house and claims you are a poacher there. But this evidence in no way explains why you are living in this house, and why you and your family should continue living in this house, and why your true friends can well understand and empathize with that. And it doesn't tell you or your children why you or they shouldn't move out of the house whenever it is no more to your or to their liking.

Psychological Motivation

As for psychological motivation, one is most at home when one feels at home. And one feels most at home when one is doing deeds that identify this home as one's own. Strong feelings for Israel are very much part of Jews being at home in the world. To ignore these emotions or attempt to leave them behind would turn a person into a random individual in the world. To be emotionally motivated even without good reasons why is still better than not being motivated at all. To slightly paraphrase an opinion in the Talmud: one should learn Torah and keep the commandments even for an extraneous reason (*she-lo li-shmah*), because from out of the extraneous reason one might well come to do this for the inherent or true reason.⁴

Assuming, nevertheless, that Jews should remain at this psychological level is inadequate to the task of being Jewish, and of being a Zionist which I think is a major, indispensable component of being Jewish today. Emotion is where one begins, and emotion always accompanies everything significant one is able to do, but the emotional level is not where a fully intelligent human life stops or should become fixated. Emotion is not fully adequate to our existence as persons, because it doesn't tell us *why* we should perform certain acts other than that they make us feel good about ourselves (a current refrain in today's pop psychology). In other words, psychological motivation does not

⁴ B. Nazir 23a.

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supply or discover reasons that guide our actions to goals that beckon us to act *because* of them, which means acting for the sake of these goals or purposes (or what philosophers like to call “ends”). Feelings without reasons do not point us in a definite direction, one whose end is knowable; instead, feelings alone throw our actions around every which way. Emotional intensity should always accompany important rational action, but it cannot justify it.⁵ Without reasons to enable us to privilege one emotion over another, when one emotion is pushing us to act one way and another is pulling us to act the opposite way, we are frequently paralyzed in our emotional ambivalence. Or, without reason to judge which feeling takes precedence when there are two or more in conflict, one could feel one way today and quite otherwise tomorrow, and in each case act accordingly. Or, without reason to judge which feelings are justified and which are not, we are easily led by those who are clever enough to know how to manipulate people by playing to their psychological blind spots. At this level of arrested human existence, we cannot actually *decide* to act one way rather than the opposite way. At this level of human existence, there is no criterion for deciding or judging what to do as our own intelligent choice. At this level we can only react to forces that seem to have no respect for us as free, rational persons.

Immanuel Kant said: “Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind.”⁶ By analogy I would say: Feelings without reasons directing us to act are dumb; reasons without feelings motivating us to act are personally detached. But we must begin with emotionally charged action. Celebration of a founding event, what the Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim (d. 2003) called a “root experience,” is a key example of such emotionally charged action; and it is emotionally charged action that is public, not private, and structured, not spontaneous.⁷

⁵ See Plato, *Philebus*, 20E–22E; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 10.2/1172^b26–35.

⁶ *Critique of Pure Reason*, B75.

⁷ *God's Presence in History* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), 8–14.

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[More information](#)**Jewish Celebration/Jewish Commemoration**

Let us now look at *how* Jews celebrate *Yom ha`Atsma`ut*: Israel Independence Day, which commemorates the founding event of the State of Israel as well. This is certainly an emotionally charged activity for most Jews, and for many friends of the Jews. Now, it is still too early to tell just what uniform communal form or “ritual” the celebration of *Yom ha`Atsma`ut* will take hold among the great majority of the Jewish people.⁸ Yet the celebration of this great event (and perhaps some other similar events as well) will have to take some definite ritual form if it is to continue to be celebrated by the Jewish people in any coherent way. Without this kind of ritual formalization, this celebration will not be a commemoration by which Jews renew their own personal identification with an event more and more of them did not actually experience themselves. Instead, this celebration will become a nostalgic occasion for those who did experience this event to remind those who didn’t actually experience it of how it belongs to them alone. But then, this kind of nostalgia will most likely fade away once those who actually experienced it are no longer here in this world. Only with this kind of ritual formalization or codification will Israel Independence Day become like the other great events that Jews celebrated with definite, legally structured, rituals like the Passover *seder* or the Hanukkah lights. Celebratory rituals have staying power only when they are taken to be positive commandments (*mitsvot aseih* in Hebrew) structured by law (*halakhah* in Hebrew). Thus emotionally charged action, like the celebration of *Yom ha`Atsma`ut*, needs to take on public form that can be handed down from one generation to another (that is what “tradition,” *masoret* in Hebrew, means) with historical continuity.⁹

Furthermore, we need to consider whether such public ritual forms need to be “religious,” that is, whether they have to have a connection to God, or whether they can simply be the “cultural”

⁸ See B. Avodah Zarah 36a. See MT: Rebels, 2.7.

⁹ M. Avot 1.1.

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celebration of national or civic “holidays” rather than the cultic celebration of “holy days” (*haggim* or *yamim tovim* in Hebrew) in the literal sense. Whether religious or secular, though, commemorative rituals like these make sense only when they are accepted as moral imperatives. So, if there is a moral imperative to celebrate the founding of the State of Israel in whatever way, then that imperative must be seen as part of the larger imperative to support the continuing existence of the State of Israel. But, if the celebration of the founding event is severed from the larger present imperative to support (in whatever way) the State of Israel as a personal obligation, this celebration will degenerate into sentimentality. This kind of sentimentality is dangerous, because it diverts attention from present tasks by indulging the desire to flee from the present into a frequently romanticized past. Such sentimentality makes one ignore how present tasks point one into the future *before* one can retrieve his or her past for its useful precedents to inform present activity. Unlike this kind of sentimentality, one should not be interested in the past for its own sake; instead, the value of the past is when it shows one how to celebrate its great events in the present, thereby renewing these great events here and now. In fact, too much “historicism,” which can be taken to be sentimentality intellectualized, still disconnects the past from the present in a way that provides “decent burial” for the past rather than retrieving one’s own past for one’s own active present, in which the State of Israel’s life and its founding event are so indispensable.

Now the moral imperative to celebrate great events is not something that a group of rabbis simply decided is good for the Jewish people to do. It is not something that comes from the top down, so to speak. Instead, it comes from the bottom up. That is, popular celebrations of great events crop up by themselves as it were. Only thereafter do those responsible for structuring custom into law fulfill that responsibility accordingly. The structured celebration of Hanukkah is the best example of this process. It celebrates the defeat of the Hellenistic Syrian regime and their assimilationist Jewish collaborators by the Maccabees in 164 B.C.E., who then set up an independent Jewish state in the