

Hadassah (April 13, 1999)

Zionism in a Post Modern Age

Zionism has many meanings. It is important to remember that the term Zionism not only points to a movement, or an ideology, but it is also a symbol. In this latter sense I assume that all of us here are Zionists. Zionism as a symbol unites all of us, in three respects. First, it evokes echoes of fierce partisan battles of the past, political as well as military, in which we or our parents engaged. Those battles along with the majestic triumphs of the Zionism movement evokes strong emotional memories. Secondly, we are all Zionists in the sense that the term anti-Zionism, in the non Jewish world connotes not only opposition to the state of Israel but a strong measure of antisemitism. Thirdly, Zionism is a symbol affirming the belief that the Jews are a people and there is a Jewish political interest which unites that people. Historically, other Jewish movements such as the Autonomists or Bundists affirmed this notion but only the Zionist movement still exists. In this sense, as I said, we are all or should be Zionists. Whatever doubts I may harbor about my own Zionist commitments wash away when I read, as I am forced to do by virtue of my own research, the newsletters and bulletins of the American Council of Judaism or when, for example, a group at the Hebrew University sat down to plan a conference on the future of the Jewish people and were told by one department chairman that neither he nor his colleagues could participate since there was no such entity as a Jewish people. I will have more to say about post-Zionism later. I only mention this now to note that in the realm of symbols, Zionism still evokes very powerful sentiments amongst all of us.

When we turn to a specific definition of what it means to be a Zionist today, doubts are more admissible and challenges more formidable. Zionism is the movement to establish and to secure a politically autonomous Jewish entity in the land of Israel. The challenge is not so much to Zionism, as I have defined it, but to the some of its implications; implications that are clearer in the wake of fifty years experience of a Jewish state. I want to discuss two challenges to Zionism in Israel and one challenge to Zionism in the United States.

A politically autonomous Jewish entity, which in today's parlance means a Jewish state, implies three characteristics that merit mention. First, this political entity will not only have a Jewish majority but will also be rooted, in some way or another, in the Jewish tradition. Otherwise it is not a Jewish state. After all, the fact that most Americans are Christian doesn't make the U.S. a Christian state and the fact that most Italians are Catholic doesn't make Italy a Catholic state. If Israel is a Jewish state it must reflect something of the Judaic tradition. Secondly, it will be a democratic state, a state in which all citizens are equal before the law, have the same rights including of course freedom of religion, freedom of expression, and the right to vote and protection is accorded to minority rights. This was an assumption of every Zionist ideologue, of the founders of the Zionist movement and the fathers of the Jewish state. The third implication of Zionism is that since the autonomous political entity of which we spoke is a state, it will necessarily be a secular state. Let me explain what I mean by a secular state. I don't mean one in which there is strict separation of religion and state; that is almost impossible if the policies and symbols of Israel are to reflect its Jewish nature. I don't mean a state whose values and policies are neutral with regard to religion. I should hope that the state of Israel will seek to further goals and behave in accordance with norms that are embedded in the Jewish religion. What I do mean is

that regardless of the values which the state seeks to achieve, it must do so in a rational manner employing the same mechanisms that we associate with modern statecraft. Furthermore, because it is a democratic state these goals are determined by an elected government and not by a religious elite. In other words, a secular state does not undertake enterprises which are rationally unachievable because it believes that “God is great” or “God will not abandon His people”. Considerations arising from religious sources might dictate social goals if that is what a democratically elected government wants, but the government would not allow theological considerations to dictate procedure. For example, Rav Ovadia Yosef cautioning the government against entering into negotiations with the Palestinian National Authority in the period *beyn hametzim*, i.e. between the 17th of Tamuz and the ninth of Av, because this is a dangerous time for Jews to enter into negotiations suggests how little understanding he has of a secular state. The claim by religious leaders that Aryeh Deri is innocent despite his being found guilty by the Israeli courts is another unfortunate example. There religious elite who attacked the court’s decision didn’t only say the courts were wrong in finding Deri guilty. They challenged the legitimacy of the courts to decide if Deri was innocent or guilty.

Until the June, 1967 war, rabbinical leaders and religious party leaders understood the rules of the democratic game and the limitations which statecraft imposes on religious goals. They felt free to pursue such goals, but anticipated that they could only be achieved in the context of a secular democratic state. This is no longer true. In this respect, it is not only Israel’s secular and democratic nature which is being challenged, but should the religious parties succeed, I doubt if Israel could survive. I don’t want to exaggerate the nature of this challenge. Granted, it does undermine the consensual nature of Israeli society and in the backlash which it

generates, it even undermines its Jewish nature. Nevertheless, I am optimistic about the potential to overcome the challenge, not because I believe that the non-religious will decisively defeat the religious, but because of changes taking place within the religious community itself. We see the emergence of rational and reasonable religious spokesmen who themselves challenge the religious extremists.

The second challenge to Zionism comes from the post Zionists about whom you have heard and read a great deal. The post Zionists as you know are a small minority. But they and their sympathizers hold crucial positions in the Israeli academy, in the printed and electronic media, and among the country's cultural elite. Weight is added to their challenge because it is issued in the name of values which we tend to accept as inherently good – individualism rather than collectivism, a state which is ethnically and religious neutral, and a general lowering of nationalist and even patriotic tones. We would do well to recall that when Israel was founded 50 years ago the concept of a nation state, i.e. a state reflecting the character of and seeking to develop the cultural resources of a particular people was taken for granted. Today, the west takes the notion of a multi-cultural ethnically neutral state for granted and Israel is becoming something of an anomaly. A prominent journalist and member of Haaretz's editorial board called me a few month ago to ask me what I thought of a recent proposal in the area of religion. I told him that the proposal threatened to contribute to the dejudaization of the society and I therefore opposed it. "But how can you do so" he asked., "no other country in the west would do so.". My response was that I didn't see the relevance. I accepted the uniqueness of the state of Israel. That is why I lived in Israel and not in the United States. The fact that Israel was different in some respects didn't bother me. The differences might, in some cases, be a source of pride. What I had to say was totally beyond the ken of this very influential journalist.

So the post-Zionist challenge is a serious one and the westernization of Israel, a process that seems virtually inevitable, raises the threat of the increasing penetration of post-Zionist notions into the society. Nevertheless, I am optimistic on this score as well. Constraints of time prevent my elaborating what I mean. I suppose, in the last analysis my optimism stems from my belief that Jewishness is too deeply embedded in the hearts and minds of the vast majority of Israeli Jews to permit erasing it from the public arena.

The final challenge to Zionism which I wish to mention is one that effects the Diaspora, American Jews in particular. I defined Zionism as the movement to establish and secure a politically autonomous Jewish entity in the land of Israel. But Zionism is more than a belief that such an entity is legitimate or justifiable. A Zionist is dedicated to this idea, willing to exert effort and energy on its behalf, possessed of a keen interest in the success and failure of that enterprise, and in what is taking place within its borders. Secondly, Zionism, in both Israel and the Diaspora affirms the national character of the Jewish people. Hence, for American Zionists, Israel does become a kind of second homeland. The challenge to Zionism in the United States today is not the rise of anti-zionism or opposition to the state; it is in the growing indifference to the core notions of Jewish peoplehood or Jewish ethnicity

Developments in the last two decades are characterized by the emergence of personal and privatized Judaism and an accompanying decline of ethnic Judaism. The rhetoric of ethnicity concentrates on themes such as peoplehood, community, and solidarity. Its message centers on slogans such as "We are One" and "Keep the Promise". Its surpassing moments are Super-Sundays, collective mobilizations for Israel, and well-orchestrated political campaigns for or against some specific public policy. It is necessarily militant and impersonal. The language of privatized

Jewishness on the other hand, speaks in the hushed, softer terms of individual meaning, journeys of discovery, and the search for fulfillment. Its emphases are inter-personal rather than collective. Its favored qualities are authenticity, sincerity and most recently spirituality rather than achievement or efficiency. Typically it is consoling, non-judgmental, intuitive, and non-obligating. In this climate of opinion, there are no impediments to intermarriage. From this personalist perspectives, true love, the ultimate personal experience, far outweighs one's ethnic ties. Indeed, to the degree that love needs to overcome obstacles (ethnic or religious) in order to be realized, it is considered the more authentic and marvelous. Jewishness has increasingly become an acquired taste not an historical obligation.

Intermarriage, even marriages in which a non-Jewish spouse converts to Judaism are among the contributing factors though I doubt if they are the primary ones in the development of the personalist style to which I refer. A number of studies confirm that even among converts to Judaism, ritual observance may be sustained but ethnic sentiments, including ties to Israel, are less intense than among those who are born Jewish. This is not at all surprising since the convert and of course the non-converted marriage partner will have internalized Christian conceptions of what it means to be affiliated to a religious group; conceptions, we may add, which all American Jews increasingly internalize. The assimilation process is not simply a process whereby an individual distances himself further and further from his own roots. It is also a process in which the group increasingly internalizes conceptions which prevail in the general culture about itself, about others and about God . This form of acculturation is inevitable in an open society and under certain circumstances may be a source of strength. But it is a mistake to believe that it is invariably a source of strength. Emphasis on the self and its realization rather than on obligations

transcending the individual person, entails a turning away from the kinds of commonplace commitments that lack the special cachet of personal authenticity or inner growth.

A recent survey of American Jews shows that younger age cohorts are, claim to be more spiritual than older age cohorts. For example younger Jews are more likely to report they believe in God than are older Jews. But they are significantly less concerned with ethnic issues and feel lesser ties to other Jews. Whether these developments may reverse themselves or how those charged with strengthening American Jewish-Israel relations might confront these and related developments is a tough question. I suspect that to meet the challenge we need to do two things. First, remind our children and our community that the Jewish religion itself contains an ethnic dimension. Any effort to deny the centrality of ethnicity and peoplehood within Judaism, or any effort to deny that in the Jewish conception of religion, obligations to God include special obligations to fellow Jews, represent distortions of Judaism. This is a twisted Jewish version of Christianity, not authentic Judaism. But the second effort to meet this challenge has to be to project the state of Israel, and if necessary transform Israel into a place where American Jews, youth in particular, can find a special kind of spiritual meaning.