

Essential Zionism: Revisiting "The Zionist Ideas" after Oct. 7

An Essay and Suggestions Toward a Syllabus

By author Gil Troy

The first Zionist text I thought of after October 7 was Gershon Shaked's 1980 "No Other Place" (p. 283). Throbbing with agony, Shaked recalls how, in Vienna in 1938, Nazi hooligans looted his apartment on Kristallnacht, then did unspeakable things to his 9-year-old self. Like the Jewish people, Professor Shaked, who won the 1993 Israel Prize for his literary criticism, did not just survive – he thrived. He understood the Jews' "secret weapon," which Joe Biden learned from Golda Meir: "We have no place else to go." But Shaked also neutralized his "ambivalences," realizing, as we must today, that our "commitment must be unequivocal." (p. 283).

Shaked's weary but muscular phrase *Ein Makom Acher* – there's no other place – echoed the Zionist pioneer Joseph Hayyim Brenner. Born in Ukraine in 1881, slaughtered by marauding Arabs near Tel Aviv in 1921, Brenner wrote, "it is very possible, that here it is impossible to live, but here we must remain, here we must die, sleep... there is no other place." Recognizing Zionism as a national and individual reclamation project, Brenner proclaimed: "We have to start all over again, to lay down a new cornerstone" (p. 44).

Reeling from the bloodiest day in Jewish history since the Holocaust, I kept thinking of Hayyim Nahman Bialik's 1903 poem evoking the Kishinev Pogroms, "The City of Slaughter" (p. 114): "Behold on tree, on stone, on fence, on mural clay/The splattered blood, and dried brains of the dead...."

Indeed, three weeks later, on November 1, after watching the Israeli government's 46-minute video depicting the rampage, Charles Lane devoted half of his *Washington Post* column to reprinting Bialik's lament. Lane explained that Hamas's and too many Gazans' "overt pleasure-taking in Jew-killing inflames a sensitive place within the emotional centers of every Israeli and Jewish mind." Such Jew-hating glee evokes Holocaust, pogrom, Medieval disputations, the flaying of rabbis' skins, the destruction of two temples, all resonating in that searing poem.

Those were the texts, the images, the wails, haunting me those first awful days. On Wednesday, October 11, even more depressed, despairing, lost, I attended the funeral of a beautiful 22-year-old soul, Ben Mizrachi, a friend of my son's – and of all of us – from Vancouver. Ben moved to Israel, full of idealism and a love for life, only to be slaughtered at the SuperNova music festival.

"I hope he's dead," my son, had sighed on Monday, fearing what those sadists might be doing to his friend, who had served as a combat medic, if they kidnapped him. When we heard about his death on Tuesday, we didn't want to know how he died. Who wanted to know if he was shot by their paragliders of death, if his body was maimed. We only wanted to honor how he lived.

But, then, that Wednesday, the first eulogy at Ben's funeral changed it all. He and his friend Itai Bausi, a Duvdevan commando, ran back toward the bullets, at least three times. Commandeering a golf cart, they ferried some of the wounded to the medical tent, while treating others. Eventually, we saw the last photo of Ben, snatched from a video, crouching behind a car, a medical kit on his bag, waiting to help.

Suddenly, the blue-and-white switch flipped back on in my head. Zionism never promised a rose garden, only our own, often-embattled, Promised Land. In 1947, as Zionists debated whether to accept the UN's November 29th Partition Plan shrinking the Jewish homeland and internationalizing Jerusalem, Chaim Weizmann warned: "The State will not be given to the Jewish people on a silver platter." That phrase inspired Natan Alterman's classic poem "Magash HaKesef," The Silver Platter (p. 30), wherein "the nation arises, heartbroken but breathing/To receive the miracle, the only one, there is no other...."

Sadly foreshadowing funeral after funeral, photograph of one beaming face with everything to live for reduced to a memorial book after another, Altman writes: "wearing their youth like dew glistening on their head," two heroes identify themselves as "the silver platter on which the Jewish state was given."

I returned to my hopeful self. On October 7, the government failed; the army failed temporarily – but the people of Israel succeeded. Ben, Itai and thousands of others, Jews and non-Jews, fought back, repelling most Hamas invaders within 24 hours. Considering that more than 3000 terrorists and hundreds of other Gazans swarmed in, the ratio of armed marauders to innocents killed was remarkably low, although nevertheless heartbreaking.

And how did Israelis save Israel? Thanks to Zionism. The Zionist ideas of self-reliance, self-defense, and self-assurance raised generations of Israelis ready and able to defend our country, our people, and Western civilization.

Zionism cannot defeat Jew-hatred – it's the Jew-haters' disease, meaning it's not the Jews' responsibility to solve. But what Zionism can do, has done, and is doing daily, is give Jews values, a methodology of response, a motivation, vision and the skill-set to fight when necessary, but still build, rebuild, and dream always.

Dozens of other texts from *The Zionist Ideas* – highlighting just how many Zionist visions have emerged over the last century-and-a-half, and just how prescient so many of them were – have since taken on new relevance, with each battle, with each casualty, with each new solidarity mission, with each painful yet prideful lecture and Zoom I do. Sometimes, I feel called to quote David Ben-Gurion, on January 16, 1948, (p. 150) that "There is now nothing more important than war needs, and nothing equal to war needs," because that "cruel and jealous Moloch" of war, that god demanding child sacrifice, "knows neither compassion nor compromise." As I read these words, I find myself thinking that until Israel restores safety in the South and returns every evacuee home to the North, Zionists are living in today time, fighting relentlessly for victory.

But just as Jews are always living on secular time and Jewish time, Zionists simultaneously live in today, the day after, and, with apologies to Bill Clinton and Fleetwood Mac, we also don't... stop... thinking about tomorrow. In thinking about the Day After, meaning how we go forward with our Arab neighbors, it's worth reading one of the most controversial and misquoted Zionist essays, Ze'ev Jabotinsky's "Iron Wall."

In 1923, Jabotinsky respected Arab national aspirations, refusing to endorse Arabs' expulsion. Looking ahead, he understood that "Only when not a single breach is visible" in the Jews' "iron wall" of security, would the Arabs' "extreme groups lose their sway" so "moderates" can "offer suggestions for compromise." (pp. 73-74). But to truly appreciate Jabotinsky and today's heroes, turn back a few pages and read his vision of Zionist youth, embodying "beauty, respect, self-esteem... honor" and generosity, (pp. 70-71) – describing so many we did raise but have now buried.

Pair those essays with Yitzhak Rabin, who hoped to sheathe his sword but also refused to drop it prematurely. On October 6, 1994 he rejected "the road of zealotness," hewing to the "road of maintaining a Jewish, democratic, liberal way of life." (p. 204)

And, in thinking about tomorrow, I read how the poet Rachel Bluwstein issued a proud, nationalistic call in 1926 to plant a tree, with "an outburst of song." (p. 55). I marvel that in 1948, when six Arab armies attacked, a 23-year-old Haim Hefer looked ahead to the time when he and his wife, surrounded by "the children," will look back on this bloody war's glories and worries, remembering how "we fought and we loved." Oh, we all can't wait to sigh as Hefer eventually did too, that "There were times" – those were the days. (pp. 269-270).

A mere eight years later, in 1956, Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik would be able to chronicle the miracles Israel already embodied, crying out in joy each time as he listed them, "Listen! My beloved knocks!" (p. 238) And, whenever I'm discouraged, I read the Israeli and Zionist miracles Hillel Halkin catalogues, decades later in 2013, as he judges Israel's story by saying "There's been nothing like it in human history. A small and ancient people," lost, wandering, humiliated, returns, rebuilds, and flourishes. "Had it not happened, could it have been imagined? Would anyone have believed it possible?" (p. 320)

By springtime, as the universities we most worshiped tolerated encampments that became home to the pro-Hamas values we most abhor, other texts became ever-more relevant. The vicious ideological assault on Zionism proved that as much as those of us in Israel need to read the Zionist ideas and this book desperately needs a Hebrew translation – Jews throughout the world need *The Zionist Ideas* even more if they are to overcome the profoundly inaccurate narratives that exist today. Jews in America and across the globe need to reassert that the Zionist ideas are precisely that – a broad and compelling set of *ideas*, a wide range of perspectives that resist the simplistic ideological pigeonholing that has become pervasive in so many circles.

Challenging students to keep perspective, I see how much they enjoy reading Rabbi David Hartman's "Auschwitz or Sinai," (1982), insisting "We will mourn forever because of the memory of Auschwitz. We will build a healthy new society because of the memory of Sinai." (p. 257). Similarly, the words of Theodor Herzl, the founder of the formal Zionist movement in 1897, still resound, that "We are a people -- one people" and that "whatever we attempt" in our new Jewish state in our old-new homeland, "to accomplish for our own welfare, will react powerfully and beneficially for the good of humanity." (pp. 14-16). That's why we don't build our identities, our Zionism, our homeland, on a foundation of anti-anti-Semitism, but on a positive Zionist vision, rooted in tradition, dreaming of a better world.

To those who believe that nationalism is a dirty word, or only belongs to the Right, great liberal nationalists like Isaiah Berlin (p. 154), Ruth Gavison (p. 367), and Yuli Tamir (p. 342), all celebrate what Golda Meir in her 1958 UN speech celebrating Israel's tenth anniversary called "a nationalism which is constructive and wholesome." (p. 187)

And for those who need shoring up as anti-Zionists launch their "historicide" and seek to kill our story, deny our rights, and negate our ties to the land, almost every text can help. Still, it's particularly helpful to read Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, on our deep "organic" ties to the land (p. 92). The great leftist writer A.B. Yehoshua beautifully defined a Zionist in 2017 as someone who understands "that the State of Israel doesn't belong solely to its citizens, but to the entire Jewish people." (p. 453.) The Canadian human rights activist Irwin Cotler affirms that the Jews are the Middle East's original aboriginal people, "a prototypical First nation or indigenous people," practicing Judaism, which is "a prototypical indigenous religion, the first of the Abrahamic religions." (p. 353). And the religious peace activist Leah Shakdiel loves "annoying" her "secular Israeli friends" by telling them "that if they do not see themselves as Jews," only then do they become "imperialists, colonialists, who have no business being here." We, they, are in Israel, the Jewish homeland, because of the Jewish ties to this particular homeland.

The Tunisian-born anti-Colonialist writer Albert Memmi helped build the very ideological structure now being weaponized against the Jewish state. But he knew the truth. The Jews of the East were doubly oppressed – by European colonialists and their neighboring Arab tormentors. Zionists, therefore, were both Jews and non-Jews, "who having found that the Jewish situation is a situation of oppression" in pre-state times, recognize "the reconstruction of a Jewish state as legitimate," so that Jews can be free and liberated too. (pp. 164-167).

Still, Professor Ruth Wisse warned in 2007, in *Jews and Power*, that the real "Jewish problem," is "the problem of nations that blamed their dysfunction on the Jews." In a world that was ugly then – and is uglier now – the Jews' traditional mission of "tikun olam," fixing the world, expanded: "The word goes forth from Zion in ways that earlier Zionists never intended: in defending themselves, Jews have been turned into the fighting front line of the democratic world." (pp. 403-404).

Of course, it's always useful to touch base with Israel's 1948 Declaration of Independence, (p. 145), its military's extraordinary "Code of Ethics" (pp. 360-361), and the Prayer for the State of Israel – written in the kind of unity we need by the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Isaac Halevi Herzog, the Sephardi Chief Rabbi Ben Zion Meir Chai Uziel, with a key line added by the Nobel prize-winning novelist S.Y. Agnon, and published in the secular newspaper Ha'aretz (p. 235). Finally, it is remarkable how these texts spawned the poignant, patriotic, courageous final goodbyes to their parents penned by modern heroes like Ben Zussman and Shachar Fridman –which deserve to be added to the next edition.

One text after another, one larger-than-life superstar after another, one inspiring, reassuring idea after another, from three main Zionist eras, the Pioneers, the Builders, the Torchbearers, and all six main streams of Zionist thought, have kept me going during these trying days. That is why, I still stand by what I wrote over twenty years ago, and keep updating every day, that proud cry "I am a Zionist!" (p. 439)

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