

Shabbat Lech Lecha 5786

Who is a Zionist?

Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

I was in third grade at Jewish day school when I was assigned to write a report about Theodor Herzl. I had never heard of the man, so I turned to my most reliable source of information.

“Mom, who was Theodor Herzl?”

“He was the father of modern Zionism.”

“Ok. What's Zionism?”

“It's the idea that Israel should be a Jewish state.”

That left me so confused. I had all these other questions in my head: Hadn't Israel *always* been Jewish, starting from the Torah? Why would anyone today have a problem with Israel being Jewish? And why would Herzl be celebrated for thinking of something so obvious, like being the first to say the sky is blue?

Boy, did I have a lot to learn.

---

“Are you a Zionist?”

After October 7th, that question sometimes has an accusatory edge. Kind of like, “Are you a Jew?” As if we're hiding something dark and nefarious.

October 7th, 2023, changed so much about Israel and about Jewish life everywhere. It changed how many people in the world see Zionists. But it did not change what Zionism *is*. Not at all. This word is utilized so often today, by so many people, and it has become politically charged. The fact is many people - educated adults included - misunderstand this important word.

It's important for all of us, from child to adult, to understand what Zionism means, so we can all be openly proud Zionists. My favorite definition is one we all know already, in

Hebrew no less. As Hatikvah concludes: "*Lihyot Am Hofshi Baartzeinu Eretz Tzion VYerushalayim*. To be a free nation in our land, land of Zion and Jerusalem."

Israel's national anthem gets it just right. Zionism advocates that the Jews should have a state of their own in the historically Jewish homeland of Israel. A Jewish home today in the Jewish homeland.

That's because G-d promised *this* place to Abraham and his descendants, the Jewish people. We read this promise just today in Parashat Lech Lecha.

And because Israel is where so much of Jewish history happened.

And because when the Jews were exiled for 2,000 years, there were always some Jews who lived continuously in Israel.

And because when the Jews were exiled for two millenia, the dream of returning home to Israel and Jerusalem constantly animated their religious lives: synagogues faced Jerusalem; Passover Seders ended with "Next Year in Jerusalem"; weddings ended with smashing the glass to recall broken Jerusalem; and many more.

It's because when Jews did not have a homeland to keep them safe, Jews suffered from persecution and pogroms in so many places over the centuries.

And because Jews have the right to determine their own fate and history, and to not be second class citizens anymore, anywhere.

These were all true before 1948 when *Medinat Yisrael* - the State of Israel - was created. Since then, there are additional reasons to be a Zionist.

Because Israel is where about half of the world's Jews live today.

And because Israel is home to an army that protects and defends Jews in Israel, non-Jewish Israelis, and Jews around the world.

And because Israel is where Jewish culture can be the majority culture and thrive.

And because when Israel is strong and secure, Jews around the world are safer. But when Israel is seen as weak and under attack, Jews around the world are in more danger. This has demonstrated itself over the past two years with increased antisemitism everywhere.

I'll pause here to clarify that the Jewish state of Israel has an obligation to provide equal rights for all its citizens, Jews and non-Jews alike. That's not just my opinion; it's in Israel's Declaration of Independence. *Of course* there is room for non-Jewish Israelis to live there, as is the case in any democracy. More than that, there should be space in Israel for them to thrive in their own identities as Christians, Muslims, Druze, and others.

Israel is both new and old. The State of Israel is only 77 years old; there are people in this room older than this. But the Jewish connection to *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel, goes back about 4,000 years to Abraham, the first Jew.

In this morning's Torah reading we hear G-d tell Abraham “*Lech Lecha*. Get going from your land, from your birthplace, from your father's house to the land that I will show you...’ [Abraham and Sarah] came to the land of Canaan...and G-d said ‘I will assign this land to your offspring’” (Gn. 12:1-7).

Ever since then, our people has been connected to that small patch of earth east of the Mediterranean. The gist of the entire Torah is this: the Jewish family was born in Israel, became enslaved in Egypt, and then marched 40 years through the desert to return home to Israel. When our patriarch Jacob approached his final days at the end of Genesis, he implored his children to bury him in Israel. He conveyed: *Physically my body is here in Egypt, but my home is there in Israel. When I am gone, make sure to bring me home.*

That's another way to describe Zionism: seeing Israel as the Jewish home.

There's a wonderful history book about Israel, called “Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn.” The author, Daniel Gordis, begins by tracing the beginning of modern Zionism in the late 1800's. Herzl was a key player, of course, but not the only influential voice. The third chapter is about how from its early origins Zionism was a conversation, not an ideology. A conversation, not an ideology. The key point is that from the start there were very divergent views about what Zionism should be, what kind of Jewish state they should try to create.

Picture a tent: a tent needs different poles in order to support itself and shelter others underneath. Imagine those various poles holding up the tent were different visions for what the future Jewish state should look like. Herzl was one pole with his vision for political Zionism, a conventional nation-state like all others. But then there was Ahad Ha'am who argued that a future state should be a Jewish cultural center that strengthens the cultural and spiritual life of the Jewish people everywhere around the

world. Meanwhile, Ze'ev Jabotinsky championed Revisionist Zionism and trained young Jews for the inevitable military fights to come. AD Gordon modeled Labor Zionism, the ethos of physically working the land with bare hands. Then there was HaRav Abraham Isaac Kook who pioneered Religious Zionism. All of these were very different pictures of what a Jewish state should look like, and they and their followers engaged in fierce arguments at times. These were different poles under the Zionist tent, but each of these approaches widened that very same tent.

This too-brief history of different strands of Zionism demonstrates that from the beginning there were *many* different approaches to what a Jewish state should look like.

The same is true today. Both in Israel and in the Diaspora, Zionists may disagree strongly among themselves about the current and future direction of the state of Israel, and we do. We definitely do. But especially at this moment in time, it's critical to affirm the following: Zionists stand with the *people* of Israel. It's easy to be consumed by our opinions of the Israeli Prime Minister and government, or how the war is going. Those are real issues, but recall that Zionism is bigger than these particulars. It's about supporting a Jewish homeland in Israel in some form. It's about supporting the *people* of Israel, not necessarily the *government*. That should be all of us.

The Anti Defamation League website addresses this important topic. It adds: "Zionism includes those across the [political] spectrum from progressives, moderates and conservatives and those who are apolitical. There are Zionists who are critical of Israeli policies, just as there are Zionists who rarely voice disagreement with the Israeli government. There are diverse views among Zionists about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, about how to promote peace, whether to support a two-state solution, and about approaches to Israeli settlements. Zionism does not preclude support for Palestinian self-determination and statehood."

In other words, many Zionists support a future Palestinian state, while many others oppose. They are all still Zionists. That shouldn't be a dealbreaker.

Zionism is a big tent with lots of poles for lots of different types of people. But what they all share in common is seeing Israel as a Jewish home. Israelis themselves are all over the map on these specific issues, and nobody questions their Zionism.

Many of us here can name flaws with Chicago and its leadership. Lots of flaws. That doesn't take away from our being proud to be from Chicago. Same with America. From the beginning, so many Americans have taken serious issue with our country's

leadership, but criticizing our government doesn't make us less American, or less patriotic.

Some Jews today feel less attached to Israel altogether because of the war in Gaza. I understand their deep disappointment with the Prime Minister. I hear them wishing the war had been conducted differently. Israel's leadership is certainly not perfect, and I too have a list of things I wish Israel did differently or better, during the war and in general. But these Jews who feel less attached today should separate their feelings for the *government* of Israel from the *people* of Israel. Many of them make that distinction with how they feel about being American. Why shouldn't they do the same with Israel?

The Gaza war - thankfully in a ceasefire now - should not diminish anyone's Zionism. It may have challenged our feelings about Israel's leadership. But the last two years in Israel should actually underscore the importance of why we should support Israelis and their right to live freely and safely at home.

---

"Are you a Zionist?"

Absolutely I am. I know it doesn't poll well in some spaces. I'm aware it's a slur in some circles. I get that the word is commonly misunderstood, which is why I felt compelled to define it today. I know that some people might assume that I don't care about Palestinians, when I actually do. I sometimes disagree with the Israeli government and some of the army's decisions. But I'm absolutely still a Zionist. Supporting our people is a core part of my being Jewish.

Sometimes today it feels like the rest of the world stands against me, against us. I know that's not entirely true, that Israel has many allies outside the Jewish community as well. Their support matters and I deeply appreciate it. But the Gaza war shifted things, and sometimes we supporters of Israel *feel* alone.

In these moments, I gain inspiration to not back down from none other than Abraham and a verse we read just this morning.

We all know that Abraham was the first Jew, though the Torah never calls him that. Instead, Lech Lecha refers to him as *Avram Halvri*, Abram the Hebrew. What's the story there?

The Midrash offers three possibilities of what it means to be an *lvri*, a Hebrew. Here's the one that resonates with me the most: Metaphorically, while the whole world stood on one side (*Ever*), Abraham stood on the other. That is, while the whole world believed in

many gods, Abraham was unafraid to believe in the one true G-d. Even if he was the only one, he courageously stood alone. For us, our people is distinct because of our unique traditions and beliefs, starting with monotheism and extending to the idea that Jews should have a home in Israel. We should be fearless in the face of opposition and hold our ground, just as Abraham did. He and Sarah were the first two, and they stood alone. But then they gave birth to a family - us - that would later stand together in that very same plot of land - in body and in spirit.

Shabbat Shalom.