

Is Judaism Fundamentally Zionist?



This is the ninth essay of 18Forty's new "Faith in Reason" series with Rabbi Steven Gotlib, released every month. [Sign up for it here](#), and read the [eighth essay here](#).

At first blush, Zionism might seem like a strange topic to cover in this series. One might argue that Zionism is a political ideology, not a theological position! Both Jews and non-Jews can identify as Zionists, nothing ought to tie it to Jewish theology and philosophy! That's an obvious strawman, but the general perspective seems to be fairly common. Most assume that Zionism and Judaism need not go together – the former is a political position while the latter is a religion. Is there a case to be made that Zionism is inherent within Judaism? Let's explore that question together.

We must begin by defining "Zionism." To use the definition that is most accessible to people, this essay will rely on the definition that comes up when one searches "Zionism Definition" on Google. This defines Zionism as "a movement for (originally) the re-establishment and (now) the development and protection of a Jewish nation in what is now Israel." This definition is surely imperfect and ignorant of the various alternative definitions offered since the term was first coined. The truest grasp of this exploration requires an in-depth discussion of historical circumstances surrounding the implications of Zionism. For our purposes, however, this provides a starting point and definition in line with how the vast majority of self-identified Zionists use the term.

The Zionist Thrust of Torah

Many passages in the Torah support Jewish claims over the Land of Israel. Here are a handful:

Genesis 12:6-7: Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land. Hashem appeared to Abram and said, "I will assign this land to your offspring." And he built an altar there to Hashem who had appeared to him.

Genesis 26: 2-5: Hashem had appeared to him and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land which I point out to you. Reside in this land, and I will be with you and bless you; I will assign all these lands to you and to your heirs, fulfilling the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your heirs as numerous as the stars of heaven, and assign to your heirs all these lands, so that all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your heirs inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings."

Genesis 48: 3-4: And Jacob said to Joseph, "Hashem, who appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, blessed me and said to me, 'I will make you fertile and numerous, making of you a community of peoples; and I will assign this land to your offspring to come for an everlasting possession.'

Exodus 23:31: I will set your borders from the Sea of Reeds to the Sea of Philistia, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates; for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hands, and you will drive them out before you.

Deuteronomy 4:40: Observe God's laws and commandments, which I enjoin upon you this day, that it may go well with you and your children after you, and that you may long remain in the land that your God Hashem is assigning to you for all time.

Other areas throughout the Tanakh refer to the Land of Israel as God's chosen land for the Jewish People. If, as we have explored, one has good reason to believe that God exists and gave the Torah, then one has very good reason to identify the Land of Israel as what he bequeathed to the Jewish People. Indeed, this is the nature of Rashi's very first comment on the Torah:

IN THE BEGINNING — Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah which is the Law book of Israel should have commenced with the verse (Exodus 12:2) “This month shall be unto you the first of the months” which is the first commandment given to Israel. What is the reason, then, that it commences with the account of the Creation? Because of the thought expressed in the text (Psalms 111:6) “He declared to His people the strength of His works (i.e. He gave an account of the work of Creation), in order that He might give them the heritage of the nations.” *For should the peoples of the world say to Israel, “You are robbers, because you took by force the lands of the seven nations of Canaan”, Israel may reply to them, “All the earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it and gave it to whom He pleased. When He willed He gave it to them, and when He willed He took it from them and gave it to us.”*

I have argued elsewhere that this grants the Jewish People what might be called *honorary indigeneity*, which is to say that even if other people were living in the land before the Jewish People came to possess it, God’s wanting the Jewish People to own it gives a greater right to call it their homeland.

In addition to the above, there are many mitzvot (at least 26 of the 613) that can only be performed in Israel, and an inherent holiness to the land that many commentators say cannot be matched outside of it. The Ramban went so far as to write in his comments on *Vayikra* 18:25 that “Dwelling in the Land of Israel is of equal importance to all the commandments of the Torah.”

All together, this presents a strong case that Zionism is inherent to Judaism even from our earliest sources and commentaries. Astute readers may note that the “usual suspects” in building a religious case for Zionism such as Rabbis Abraham Isaac Kook, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and others were not included in this discussion. This is not to minimize their positions but to demonstrate that a case for Zionism can easily be constructed from Judaism’s primary sources alone. The question we must now ask is—from the baseline of Torah—can an oppositional case be built as well?

The Opposers of Zionism

Jewish opposition to Zionism can take many different forms, ranging from passive non-Zionism to active Anti-Zionism. Utilizing the definition of Zionism above, this article will simply address those who oppose “the development and protection of a Jewish nation in what is now Israel” from a religious perspective. In other words, this will not address those positions that argue “a Jewish ethnostate is inherently undemocratic and therefore has no right to exist” or “the Jewish colonization of Palestinian land is wholly unjustifiable.”

We will instead focus on those who utilize source-based arguments against the Jewish value of developing and protecting a Jewish state in the Land of Israel. It should be noted at the outset that many of the thinkers discussed below were addressing historical realities quite different from our own. All, however, are used by contemporary opponents of Zionism in constructing their case and therefore deserve to be laid out here.

One argument, based on some of the verses cited above, is that Jewish failure to live according to the Torah is “to forfeit the right to dwell in that sacred place.” This is based on the idea that the Jewish People don’t *really* own the land. God gave it to the Jewish People to use as a place to live by God’s will. Indeed, when the Jewish People showed themselves unable to do so, they were sent off into exile! Who are we, then, to say that we have a right to re-settle that land? The weakness of this argument is that the Land of Israel is referred to in many of those same verses as an eternal homeland for the Jewish People and God explicitly desires the Jewish People to reach a level where we are worthy of it.

The Three Oaths

Perhaps a stronger argument against Zionism as inherent to Judaism is Talmud’s infamous Three Oaths (*Ketubot 111a*):

What are these Three Oaths? One, that Israel should not go up [to the land] in a wall [i.e. en masse, which Rashi interprets as forcefully]. Two, the Holy One adjured Israel not to rebel against the nations of the world. Three, the Holy One adjured the nations that they would not oppress Israel too much.

According to this source, it was divinely sworn that the Jewish People would not attempt to settle Israel as their country or rebel against the nations of the world while the nations also would not be overly oppressive towards the Jewish People. This source is certainly opposed to Zionism on a religious level, at least until the coming of the Messiah.

Assuming that these oaths are binding on the Jewish People rather than rhetorical, there are two common responses against the Three Oaths. One is that the Jewish People did not return to Israel by force (the first oath), as the British via the Balfour Declaration and the United Nations via Resolution 181 returned the land. The second is that all the oaths are null and void since the cataclysm of the Holocaust violated the nations’ oath to avoid over-oppressing the Jews. A third, less popular argument is that the Messianic Age has already begun and Jewish return to the Land of Israel is permitted. This language is implicitly accepted by world Jewry in the very language of the Prayer for the State of Israel recited in a majority of synagogues (Orthodox or otherwise): “Our Father in heaven, Rock and Redeemer, bless the State of Israel, *the beginning of the flowering of our Redemption.*”

Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch

Still, Jewish opposition to Zionism held strong. One perhaps surprising adherent to such a view is Rav Shamshom Raphael Hirsch, who wrote in his *Nineteen Letters* that while in exile “it is our duty to join ourselves as closely as possible to the state which receives us into its midst, to promote its welfare and not to consider our well-being as in any way separate from that of the state to which we belong.” Indeed, he felt that “the former independent state life of Israel was not even then the essence or purpose of our national existence” but rather “was only a means of fulfilling our spiritual mission.”

“Land and soil were never Israel’s bond of union,” Hirsch wrote, but “but only the common task of the Torah; therefore, it still forms a united body, though separated from a national soil; nor does this unity lose its reality, though Israel accept everywhere the citizenship of the nations amongst which it is dispersed.” For Rav Hirsch, Torah observance was the common denominator that all Jews shared. The job of the Jewish People is to live in and inspire those in the countries in which we find ourselves exiled rather than engaging in nationalist endeavors of our own. One day, however, God will see it fit “to unite again His scattered servants in one land, and the Torah shall be the guiding principle of a state, an exemplar of the meaning of Divine Revelation and the mission of humanity.”

The Yeshiva World

Perhaps the most extreme framing of Anti-Zionism from within the Yeshiva world was that of Rav Elchanan Wasserman, a close student of the *Chofetz Chaim*. He wrote that “Anti-Semites want to kill the body, but Zionists kill the soul” and that it is “better to die than consort with the Zionists.” A contemporary application of this sort of approach can be found in the Neturei Karta—literally “guardians of the city” in reference to [a story in the Gemara Yerushalmi](#)—whose [mission statement](#) emphasizes that they “oppose the existence of the State of Israel and condemn the Zionist occupation of Palestine, along with condemning the ongoing atrocities committed against its people.” In the [Q&A section](#) of their website, the Neturei Karta advocate for Israeli Jews to “give up the State, and to wait patiently for the coming of the messiah... immediately step down from power and declare an end to their Jewish government, turn over the land to the Palestinians and ask the UN to ensure that the transition be safe for all involved, including the 6 million Jews living there.”

Within the “Yeshiva world,” this sort of position is echoed by author Rabbi Yaakov Shapiro, who wrote in his book *The Empty Wagon*, that “Zionism was thus, more than anything else, a brainwashing endeavor designed to convince the Jews of an untruth — that their being Jewish meant they were a member of a nationality, a tribe, as opposed to a religion.” Rav Ahron Feldman, Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Yisroel in Baltimore, favorably reviewed Shapiro’s book. In a written exchange with Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, following the republication of his review in *the Eye of the Storm*, Rabbi Feldman situated his position within the thought of his teachers:

The Gaon Rav Yitzchok Hutner, your mori verabbi as well as mine, told me that he feared that the Jewish People will be taken to task for having concluded in the wake of the success of the Six-Day War that the Zionists were right all along. (Of course, forty years later no one entertains such thoughts.) This, Rav Hutner explained, is because Zionist ideology is, in his words, “pure apikorsus.” This view, as you well know, was shared by the vast majority of gedolei Yisrael of the past hundred years. Your own esteemed father-in-law, the Gaon Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, said, “I remember my father used to say, ‘leum’us [Zionism] is apikorsus” (taped conversation in David Holzer, *The Rav: Thinking Aloud* [Miami Beach, Florida, 2009], 174), and, in his own opinion, that “to equate Judaism with statehood is blasphemy” (ibid., p. 178). And yet what they all considered beyond the pale of Judaism, you describe as “certain lapses in religious motivation.” This is quite a wall.

Rabbi Feldman outlined his arguments against Zionism as recently as the 2020 Agudah Conference, and the official position of the Agudah remains that “any suggestion that the ideology of Zionism is compatible with Chareidi Jewry’s fundamental beliefs has no basis and must be rejected.” However, that same statement clarifies that they have “always advocated in the halls of government for Israel’s security and economic needs and general welfare, and will always do so.” By the definition we are using, then, the Agudah of today may well be Zionist despite their rejection of the label.

The Chassidish World

Perhaps the Chassidish expressions of Anti-Zionism are stronger? Two particular thinkers known for their opposition to Zionism were Rabbis Menachem Mendel Schneerson of Chabad-Lubavitch and Yoel Teitelbaum of Satmar. Chabad is known for being relatively Zionist while Satmar is known for its fierce Anti-Zionism, but the two leaders found themselves united in expressing theologies of exile for their followers even after the advent of the State of Israel.

Teitelbaum's well-known book on the subject, *Vayoel Moshe*, is split into three sections. Section one is devoted to the Three Oaths examined above. While acknowledging the oaths as aggadic rather than halakhic, the Satmar Rebbe argued that they ought to be understood as guidelines for what constitutes trying to get out of exile prematurely which he considered to be heresy. The second section of *Vayoel Moshe* discusses the halakhic obligation, or lack thereof, of living in Israel. Finally, part three discussed the Modern Hebrew language which he believed to be forbidden. He concluded that while there is value to living in Israel on an individual level, Zionism constitutes heresy, religious Zionism is a *chillul Hashem* and it is forbidden to be involved in strengthening the Israeli government via participating in elections and the like.

The mainstream of Satmar, however, is known to have condemned the Neturei Karta on several occasions. Indeed, in an episode of Rabbi Dovid Lichtenstein's *Headlines Podcast* a spokesman for Satmar even said that Satmar Chasidim are nowadays "de-facto Zionists" in that they do participate in some form of the State of Israel even while rejecting its religious legitimacy.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe's position is more complicated. In his *Sichos* he acknowledged that "divinity is felt in a more revealed fashion" in the Land of Israel and that Israelite conquest of the Land resulted in a change in "the very essence of the land" such that it was "now the land of the Jewish People in all of its essence forever, such that it can never again be associated with another nation." On the other hand, he was also adamant that "the main service today is in the Diaspora" and that anyone wanting to make *Aliyah* "must contemplate whether he already accomplished all of the things that he needed to accomplish in the Diaspora... if he wants to merit his portion in the Land of Israel he must work in the place where he is situated to transform [that place] into the Land of Israel."

Regarding Zionism in particular, the Rebbe did not use the term *Medinat Yisrael* because the Land's belonging to the Jewish People and Divine Holiness "is not determined by a vote or majority which might change from time to time" but is rather an eternal property that can never be assigned or removed by human means. He also explicitly considered the previous Rebbe's decision to found Kefar Chabad as "a preparation for the reality that will be revealed with the coming of *Mashiah* in all of the Land of Israel. Then, there will be agricultural work..." Chabad theology, therefore, might well be Zionist albeit without using the term.

The Religious Zionist Who Questioned Zionism

Is there any way to learn from these theologies of exile within a Zionist worldview? Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (known as “Rav Shagar”), provocatively wrote in an essay newly translated in *Briti Shalom* that “Zionism has exhausted itself.” His call for “Post-Zionism” is explored in an essay newly translated in *Living Time: Festival Discourses for the Present Age* in which he acknowledged the contradictory experiences felt by peoples within the land. Rav Shagar wrote that the fact that the Arab/Palestinian also “lives here and sees this land as his beloved homeland (and the fact is that this is indeed his beloved homeland) need not impinge on my belonging to this soil.” However, Rav Shagar lamented the fact that Religious Zionism was seemingly unable to realize that dual-reality. In his words,

the response of religious Zionism toward the cultural expressions in the country [of Israel] in our time is similar to the response of the Haredim to Zionism in general: complete and utter negation. Religious Zionism, as it were, recognizes the untenable contradiction it faces in reconciling itself with the prevailing reality that exists for large portions of Israeli society. In truth, this is the proof of its programmatic failure, as it was built on [a belief in] the very possibility of building a state that combined all the existing elements [of society]. It is worth pointing out: I am speaking of a religious Zionism that believes in its program and sees in it the true inauguration of redemption.

This potential is concealed because, in my opinion, at the base of the religious awareness of religious Zionist thinkers—Rav Kook first and foremost—is the staunch will to generate a new religious mentality, a different religious understanding, one that knows how to assimilate within itself values that it did not traditionally include.

Rav Shagar seems to argue that Religious Zionism has failed because it tried too hard to fit religiosity within the box of Zionism rather than fit Zionism into religiosity. The process of developing a new religious approach, for Rav Shagar, requires the acknowledgment of multiple perspectives experienced in conversation with the solid grounding provided by faith in Judaism. Hence, he argued, “Religious Zionism must become... Religious post-Zionism.” Such a transformation would, once and for all, place Judaism’s religious convictions over and above any limitations imposed by political ideology.

Lest one assume that Rav Shagar’s “Religious post-Zionism” abandons the ideas we have been discussing, Alan Brill notes in his introduction to the new collection of essays that Rav Shagar saw his position

as the next step in the process of Zionism. Rav Kook was the era of the Messiah ben Joseph; however, we presently live in an era of Messiah ben David, where we transition from state building to personal growth and universalism. Rabbi Shagar considers Religious Zionism as a renewed attachment to the Land of Israel, but now grounded in nature and a return to the biblical sense of the land. The new era of Zionism ["post-Zionism"] will be the development of Israeli democracy, and will include a multiculturalism and multi-national democracy as the next stage in the redemptive process that reflects the hasidic consciousness of containing plurality and divisions.

Another fascinating piece by Rav Shagar on the subject was translated in *Faith Shattered and Restored*. In it, Shagar wrote that "exile is more than merely historical... it cultivates the ability to gain a foothold in the land and take root in it. The Diaspora, befitting the Jewish People by virtue of its unique character, is what constitutes its connection to the entire world, and what enables the Jews to hold fast to their land without being confined to narrow-minded parochialism and staunch patriotism."

For Rav Shagar, "the insecurity of the Diaspora must deeply inform our confidence as the inheritors of the land. Otherwise, confidence will degenerate into hubris... Such a state of mind precludes faithful devotion to God and sensitivity to the suffering of the strangers in our midst—a quality we were dispersed to the ends of the earth in order to acquire." This does not reject the fact that the land is ours and that we have a responsibility to it in the here and now. Rather, it inspires those in exile to find strength in the Jewish homeland while allowing those in Israel to reject the certainty that comes with a rejection of exile as a concept. In fact, it leads to obvious questions:

What happens when the balance of power shifts, when the exiled nation, scattered to the ends of the earth by virtue of its own exalted quality, becomes sovereign over a defined territory? Now that it has won dominion, must its collective historical memory of Diaspora and defeat compel it to treat the other residents of the land with contempt and hostility... Must power corrupt us?

These questions led Rav Shagar to advocate for a "soft nationalism"—"one that makes room for the Other, that does not look down or disdain other nations." This requires both nationalism and universalism to inform each other at all times, whether in Diaspora or in the Land of Israel:

Nationalism is rootedness in what one is, in an identity unique to the nation and the individual. However, if it is not to turn rigid and callous, it must be tempered by universalism, if only in order to introduce an element of doubt into it. Universalism subverts the preference for one national identity over another, as well as the very authentic existence of that identity. That is because universalism is the shard dimension, the common grounds for all of humankind...

Rather than abandoning the nationalist project of Zionism, in other words, Rav Shagar seeks to augment it with insight from the diasporic, exilic existence. Rather than discarding nationalism, Rav Shagar seeks to transmute it into its most productive form. If we are to turn *galut* into *geulah*, we must do so by allowing the former to experientially inform the latter. This approach neither negates nor perpetuates exile, but acknowledges the impact of exilic experience on redemption.

Another voice of this sort is the contemporary Israeli thinker, Micah Goodman. In his recently translated book *The Last Words of Moses*, Goodman writes that

throughout the history of Zionism, the Bible was invoked to justify the new Jewish sovereignty over the land. But is that the role that the Bible intended for itself? I hear the answer of the book of Deuteronomy, and the answer is no. Moses's last address is not a justification for sovereignty but an appreciation of its dangers. More than the book justifies sovereignty, it offers guidance on how to safeguard against its excesses. The book of Deuteronomy is far more than a justification of Jewish power. Deuteronomy envisions and articulates a society that is not undermined and corrupted by that power.

He concludes his book by writing that "Zionism and Deuteronomy complement one another. Zionism gave Jews power, and Deuteronomy teaches how to manage that power. The biblical story, as we have seen, chronicles the abrogation of the biblical vision. And the Zionist enterprise, which is still underway, seeks to succeed where the Bible failed. Zionism, then, is the bible's second chance."

So the Answer Is...

Zionism, as defined in this essay as the resettlement of the Land of Israel by Jews, is a Biblical value and perhaps even a mitzvah. It is not, however, without its internal and external critics. Zionists today are faced with the challenge of perpetuating religious values and ethics in the face of unimaginable cruelty from our enemies. Whether ending in success or failure, it is hard to refute the Torah's (and thus God's) call for our engagement in the project.

Recommended Reading

Orot, by Abraham Isaac Kook (tras. Bezalel Na'or)

This seminal work is Rav Kook's poetic vision of a rejuvenated Land of Israel in the modern age.

Torah Goes Forth From Zion, by Zach Truboff

Here is a masterful overview of the thought of Rav Kook and Rav Shagar in comparison to one another.

The Necessity of Exile, by Shaul Magid

This book is a controversial one, making a very strong case for Anti-Zionism on the basis of both secular and religious sources. In my opinion, it is worth reading his arguments directly to see the extent of contemporary Anti-Zionism. I summarize his arguments in my review of his book [here](#).
