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Why Am I a Zionist? Part I

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Distinctly Catholic

A few weeks ago, I had a brief debate with my colleague Claire Schaeffer-Duffy on the issue of divestment from Israeli companies. Rather than engage in the usual discussion about Israel and Palestine, that too often descends quickly into an endless recitation of atrocities to justify one's position, I thought it better to take a step back and ask myself a question, and share the result with the readers of these pages. The question: Why am I a Zionist?

As you can imagine, most of the reason is rooted in my reading of history. It is important to recall that throughout most of history, after the destruction of the Temple, throughout the Middle Ages, unto our own time, there was always a Jewish presence in the Holy Land, especially in Jerusalem. But, for most Jews, and most Jews did not live in Israel, in most centuries in the Common Era, the idea of a return to Zion was not in the cards: They were concerned with survival. Christian anti-Semitism was the norm, sometimes violent, always oppressive. That history is long and well documented and need not be repeated here.

Only with the French Revolution, did the promise of full civil rights for Jews in the West become a possibility and, even then, anti-Jewish prejudice persisted. The liberal ideal of equal rights did not prevent subsequent pogroms in the Poland or Russia. It did not prevent the kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara, a kidnapping endorsed by Pope Pius IX. And, even in France, the Declaration of the Rights of Man did not keep Dreyfus from being falsely convicted and consigned to Devil's Island. Still, throughout the nineteenth century, Zionism was simply not an idea with much currency, even among Jews. In the West, successful Jews clung to their belief in the potential for assimilation, although this resulted, as often as not, in a loss of Jewish identity. Even in very elite circles, the stain of Jewishness was enough to prevent

anything like real assimilation. To cite only one example, the great philosopher of the Enlightenment, Moses Mendelssohn, may have been accepted in every literary salon of his day despite his Jewishness, he may have played chess with Lessing, but only one of his children did not convert to Christianity.

The failure of Western assimilation is not what produced the first aliya, a wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine. That wave – and it was not much of a wave – started in Russia where hating Jews was as much a part of the national diet as zakuski. In 1881, Jews in Suvalki, near the Polish-Lithuanian border, and in Kharkov, established associations called “The Lovers of Zion” to organize emigration from Russia to Palestine. The results were meager: Of 300 members in Kharkov, 100 set out for Odessa in 1881, forty managed to make it to Constantinople, and some sixteen eventually arrived in Palestine. The numbers increased after a wave of especially vicious pogroms later in the decade. It should be noted that around 1881, the population of Jerusalem was about 20,000 people, and most experts believe that Jews were a plurality of that population. It should be noted, too, that at this time Jerusalem and all of Palestine was under the control of the Ottomans, whose corruption and incompetence viewed with each other in their administration of that territory.

Zionism emerged as a political force not among the shtetls of Russia and Poland. It was Theodor Herzl who first recognized that the “Jewish question” was a national question. He explicitly cited the failure of assimilation as his motivation:

We have sincerely tried everywhere to merge with the national communities in which we live, seeking only to preserve the faith of our fathers. It is not permitted to us. In vain are we loyal patriots, sometimes super-loyal; in vain do we make the same sacrifices of life and property as our fellow citizens; in vain do we strive to enhance the fame of our native land in the arts and sciences, or her wealth by trade and commerce. In our native lands where we have lived for centuries we are still decried as aliens, often by men whose ancestors had not yet come at a time when Jewish sighs had long been heard in the country. The majority decides who the “alien” is; this, and all else in the relations between peoples is a matter of power. In the world as it now is and will probably remain, for an indefinite period, might takes precedence over right. It is with avail, therefore, for us to be loyal patriots, as were the Huguenots, who were forced to emigrate. If we were left in peace? But I think we shall not be left in peace.

Herzl’s prose still captures the heart: “when Jewish sighs” is a phrase filled with a deep understanding of his people’s history. He was also capable of great humor. When Joseph Chamberlain, Britain’s colonial secretary, met with Herzl in 1902, Chamberlain suggested that Jews settle in Brook of Egypt. Herzl replied, “We will not go to Egypt – we have been there.”

Herzl’s call for a Jewish State was met with active hostility, even among Jews. Liberal Jews saw nationalism as a conservative throwback, and certainly German nationalism fit the bill even though Italian nationalism was originally leavened by liberal ideals. Marxist Jews saw the Zionist enterprise as a diversion from their reading of political and economic dynamics. And religious Jews believed that the return to Israel would be accomplished by God, in His own good time. Indeed, Herzl himself, and other early Zionists, were not particularly motivated by biblical notions: When Chaim Weizmann negotiated the Balfour Declaration in 1917, it was Lloyd George and Balfour who were animated by the biblical vision of Zion, not Weizmann.

Nonetheless, the fact that there was still, at the dawn of the 20th century, a “Jewish question,” brings us to what I believe is my first major reason for being a Zionist: It takes nothing away from the vision of Herzl, or the statecraft of Weizmann, or heroism of David Ben Gurion, to recognize that it was Christian anti-Semitism that made Zionism a necessity. Even as prominent and socially unassailable a Jew as Lord Rothschild was initially hostile to Herzl’s plans because he feared an anti-Semitic backlash, which

ironically made Herzl's point that assimilation would never prove a workable solution.

Jewish nationalism, unlike other forms of nationalism, suffered from a singular liability: They had no land they could call home. And, in the early years, serious efforts were made to consider alternatives for a Jewish State. For a time, Uganda was a leading candidate. Others thought that Argentina would serve the purpose. These plans came to nothing. Besides, there was as yet no sense that Jewish immigration into Palestine would ignite a furor among the Arab population there, which was small and was surrounded by other Arab lands. When the impulses of Arab nationalism came, it was clear that the Arab people, freed from the Turk, would have plenty of land to call their own. Surely, the early Zionists believed, a sliver of land along the Mediterranean was not a threat to Arab nationalism. Indeed, when the Balfour Declaration was made in 1917, King Hussein's newspaper in Mecca welcomed "the original sons of the country from which their Arab brethren would benefit materially as well as spiritually." In 1919, Weizmann met with Crown Prince Faisal, who renounced any Arab claim to Palestine and stated that Weizmann's ideals were his own. Within months, Faisal had switched his tune, not the last time that an Arab political leader would prove an unstable negotiator. Still, it was not until the riots of 1921 that most Zionists understood that there would be real, perhaps intractable, tensions with their new Arab neighbors (more on those and subsequent riots tomorrow). Jews had greatly improved the economic conditions of the region. But, as the outstanding historian of Zionism Walter Lacquer has observed, "From a purely economic point of view, Arab resistance to Jewish immigration and settlement was inexplicable and unjustified. But then the economic aspect of the conflict was hardly ever of decisive importance."

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Through all these first decades of the twentieth century, Zionism remained a minority movement among European Jews. In the West, many still clung to their assimilationist hopes: They could yet prove themselves to be good Germans, or good Frenchmen, and the fact of their Jewish ancestry would cease to count against them. How wrong they were. Continued pogroms in Eastern Europe led to the predominance of Jews from Russia and Poland in the second and third aliyas, but their numbers were counted only in the tens of thousands. Britain went back on the promises it had made in 1917. In the U.S., Jews like other Eastern Europeans, were largely kept out by restrictive immigration laws. Zionism continued to try to raise political support in Europe and to give material assistance to Jews who had trekked to Israel. They knew they faced large obstacles to the realization of Herzl's vision of a Jewish State. No one could contemplate the horrors that awaited them before that dream would be realized.

So, the first reason I am a Zionist: If Jews had been happy to assimilate and disappear as a people, that was their right. But, Jews, like all peoples, also have a right to a homeland if they choose. And, precisely because Christian anti-Jewish bigotry made assimilation impossible, we Christians have a particular obligation to support Jewish aspirations for nationhood.

N.B. To all my Jewish friends, a very happy New Year.

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