

What does it mean to be a Zionist today?

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Rabbi Lisa Hochberg-Miller, Temple Beth Torah

Leonard Fein, the founder of *Moment* magazine, wrote these words: “There are two kinds of Jews in the world. There is the kind of Jew who thinks that fighting is not the Jewish way, who willingly accepts that Jews have their own and higher standards of behavior. And not just that we have them, but that those standards are our lifeblood, are what we are about. And there is the kind of Jew who thinks we have been passive long enough, who is convinced that it is time for us to strike back at our enemies, to reject once and for all the role of victim, the kind of Jew who willingly accepts that Jews cannot afford to depend on favors, that we must be tough and strong. And the trouble is, most of us are both kinds of Jew.” Leonard Fein wrote those words.... in September 1982 in the aftermath of the First Lebanon War. Fein’s words remind us that our current conversations about war, Jewish morality, and Israel, are not new conversations, but perhaps new incarnations of ongoing dilemmas that weigh on the Jewish soul.

What does it mean to be a Zionist today? I think it is imperative for us to ask this question of ourselves both as individuals, and as a people. Zionism is the belief that the Jewish people can and should have a political state, inspired by the ancient homeland of our people. Jews in some small number have lived on this land, sometime with political sovereignty, but mostly without political sovereignty, for 3,500 years. I do believe that most Jews in the world believe that we have a right to a Jewish homeland on our ancient soil, and hence are Zionists. But with most ideologies, what we believe about the particulars of that Jewish state, and how we choose to express our Zionism, vary greatly. Even when we disagree with each other, most of our beliefs have substance, and I can say, from knowing most of you, all of our beliefs are passionate. I believe that most Zionists would like to see these five things:

1. for Israel to exist in security
2. for Israel to be Jewish, democratic, and pluralistic
3. for an end to violence from Islamic militants towards Israel
4. for a normalization of Palestinian politics that allows Palestinians to advance toward a better future
5. and, for whatever role Islam is to play in the Palestinian future, it not be used to fuel a hatred toward the state of Israel, and toward Jews.

I do believe these 5 ideas at the very least, are something that binds us together as Zionists. But it is clear that for many Jews, what it means to be a Zionist is a changing, internal dialogue. It is more than being defenders and cheerleaders of Israel, and it is more than blanket support for whatever happens in Israel, and it is more than being visitors, or tzedekah senders. This isn’t just a conversation for us, as diaspora Jews. *Haaretz* columnist Ari Shavit, writes that this is a question Israelis are confronting, too. It is not a conversation that can be boiled down to just whether one is politically left wing or right wing, religiously secular or observant, or does or does not support ongoing occupation. The complex political and social issues that Israel faces impacts Zionist ideology. Israel today, says Shavit, faces a reality that the Palestinian conflict may not end in the foreseeable future, and that Israel’s regional superiority may be challenged. Israeli society is deeply divided

over social, religious and economic issues, its liberal democratic foundation wavering, and the state's legitimacy called into question by voices within as well as without. Far from the day of Zionist visionaries like Ben Gurion, Meir, and Begin, Israelis don't believe each successive government has the wisdom to lead them through issues of occupation and social challenge. Being a Zionist today calls all of us—Israeli and non-Israelis—to an evolving understanding of Israel. Don't think we have no say in this because we are not Israelis; we are reminded Israel is not primarily the state of Israelis; it is the state of the Jewish people. It is harder than ever to be a Zionist, because to be a Zionist is to stand close to the fire of the ire of a world that has little good to say about Zionism. The other option is to renounce our Zionism, as some Jews are doing. I believe that in this troubled day and age of growing anti-Semitism, Judaism and Zionism are not separate "-isms"; a religion, wholly separate from an ideology regarding a homeland. They are both linked to the survival of the Jewish people. A world that has no place for a Jewish State, which is the manifestation of our peoplehood, is a world that before long, will believe they have no place for /have little tolerance for the Jewish people.

What is the OLD Zionism that we must move past?

Israelis themselves no longer speak of the narrow Zionist narrative of yesteryear, the state of Israel founded on a "land without people, for a people without a land". We understand that there were populations of Arabs who lived and worked the land at the time our people began to return in waves of aliyah to Israel. And the days when Israel could insist that the world has no moral standing to say anything about Israel's behavior, because of its silent behavior during the Holocaust, those days are past as well. The moral superiority that at times has characterized Israelis and Jews has been deeply diminished through decades of being-- rightly or wrongly-- an occupying military presence. Israelis themselves feel this tarnishing of their soul more deeply than any of us can imagine. The pride of military might that flowed through Jewish hearts after 1967, the years of pride at military victory over Arab armies has subsided into a serious confrontation of what it means to be a society that lives, as a matter of daily life, with hostility and terrorism. Zionist thought now wrestles with the sad understanding that a militarized society comes at a moral price. Military superiority is now expressed, not in publicly, but in a focused pursuit of technological advances, to keep Israeli troops just a few steps ahead of well-funded foreign, ideologically charged, extremists. Zionism of yesteryear believed that Israel would conquer belligerent Arab armies, and that the Middle East would settle down to peaceful co-existence, even if it was a cold peace. This Zionist dream is not the vision for peace today. Peace is less imaginable because our enemies are not what they once were- where once Egypt, Syria and Jordan sat on geographic borders, now multiple terror groups exist, in varying degrees of militarized readiness. Hezbollah, Hamas, Islamic State, Muslim Brotherhood, Syria, Iran, each have individual agendas against Israel, and countries like Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia broker treaties on our behalf, first, because we have built relations with these countries, and second, in part because, in hostilities, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Zionism's once-clear vision about the land has even changed, from a vision of the land of Abraham and Sarah, to conversations about what land is appropriate for us to settle in, to realistic assessment of what land can we defend?

So- What does it mean to be a Zionist today?

First, we must start by reminding ourselves that Zionism is an ideology, not a current political administration or policy. Zionism is suffering because many of us are confusing support for Israel and Israel's existence with support for Israel's politics. We must verbalize our unequivocal support of Israel in a world that has become increasingly more anti-Israel. We can and must make the distinction between supporting Israel and Israel's existence, and supporting Israel's politics or military decisions. We don't have to agree with every political decision of Israel's government. But just as Republicans or Democrats don't walk away from the table when the other party holds the majority, neither can we let relentless attacks on Israel's policies convince those in disagreement that Israel does not deserve our support. We do not have to be apologists for Israel, or for being Jewish, or defenders of the Jewish ability or inability to live up to a perfected morality that is applied to Israel but not other nations. This may be the diaspora's greatest casualty through the years of Israel's occupation; that a once vocal Zionist diaspora has been losing Zionists and Zionist voices, because of anger or frustration at the political decisions of Israel's government. Nothing strengthens the hands of our detractors more than to say, see, even Jews don't support Israel. It is a tool in the undermining of Israel's right to exist at the table of nations.

Today's Zionism calls on us to do real advocacy for Israel, both in sharing information and in fighting disinformation. We do not have the luxury of sitting back and expecting Israel and Israelis, and the Jewish news junkies amongst us, to speak up about Israel. By virtue of the internet, there is non-stop conversation about Israel, and if we are absent from the conversation, we can't assume the outcome will be in favor of our beliefs. Many of us may agree with current politics, but how do you speak up for Israel when you disagree with some of its political choices, expanding settlements, or means of force? Speak of what you can support, whether it is support of democracy where there is Arab representation in the Knesset, or a Jewish state where 1.5 million Arabs have full citizen rights, 20% of its citizens are Israeli Arabs, or the civil rights groups that have been started by Israelis to assure Arab rights. Advocacy for Israel is not the same as forwarding to your friends every email you get about Israel, for in truth, most of those inspire parochialism, partisanship and fear, rather than inform and deepen our understanding. Many of these emails traffic in modern-day lashon ha'rah, evil speech, hardening us against the enemies out there, something we complain *their* social media is doing to them against us. Real Advocacy is a speaking outward, to Jews in this country whose support is wavering, to non-Jews who have no depth of knowledge about why Israel and Palestine have such problems, to U.S. elected officials and to Israel's leadership.

Zionism today calls on us to advocate by fighting disinformation.

When Professor Deborah Lipstadt of Emory stood in a British court against a Holocaust denier in the year 2000 and won a verdict that the Holocaust was a historic fact, none of us could have imagined that the new tact of anti-Semitism would be in turning the Holocaust against us, positioning Jews as Nazis and yesterday's persecuted as today's perpetrator, the former victim now the current oppressor. If we ever needed proof that anti-Zionism is about a hatred of Jews, not just Israel, we need look no further than the growing attacks on Jews in European countries and the extremist speech we hear in rallies, with each passing conflict. And while government leaders in France, Great Britain and

other countries have spoken out against this anti-Semitism, we know that purposefully lies about Israel, and misappropriation of the Holocaust, are spreading into mainstream discourse against Israel. At the end of August, as we folded up our chairs from our sunset Shabbat service at Marina Park, a congregant commented, I don't think Jews in Europe could do right now what we just did, having services in public. That should give us pause, and remind us how imperative our voice is against this wave of anti-Semitism.

Lastly, I would say that to be a Zionist today is to RECLAIM something fundamental from the roots of Zionism. Israel was created not out of FEAR, but out of HOPE, for the Jewish people and our future. The greatest contribution we can make to our Israeli brothers and sisters is, at a time when they have felt fear, to remind them to be guided by the HOPE of what Israel can be. We can't allow our existential fears to guide us into withdrawing into a shell of separatism, believing that the world is Israel's enemy; that we can only trust ourselves. Israel is not alone. And we can't allow our disillusionment with Israel as it stands today to lead us into believing the Zionist endeavor isn't still noble, sacred, and vital to the soul of all Jews everywhere.

For Zionism to achieve its great promise to the Jewish people, we need to focus on the future not the past, not the wrongs we have committed or have been perpetrated on us. We must be more concerned with being right about the future than being right about the past. Let us stand together and talk together. Let us stand with our Israeli brethren and talk with them about their fears and concerns. Together let us lead our people to the Promised Land. Amen.