

How Modern is Israel? “Zionism has Little to do with Judaism”

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Zionism is primarily a Christian Protestant enterprise that has little to do with Judaism. This explains why US Christians are the most ardent Zionists and the most powerful supporters of Israel. The largest opposition to Zionism came initially from the rabbinical elite, which viewed it as heretical and an aberration of the Jewish faith. Zionism represents a break with Jewish tradition and historical continuity. Israel has to be seen in terms of European nationalism, colonial expansion, and geopolitical interests rather than as the divine fulfillment of biblical prophecies or even a culmination of Jewish history.

*The traditional Judaic yearning for “Return”, which is a purely spiritual concept, was turned into a political cause by Christians in order to accelerate the coming of Christ and force the Jews to convert to Christianity. The influence of Christian Zionists plays a very important role up to the present day. These are only some of the most provocative conclusions of **Yakov M. Rabkin’s** excellent analysis of modern day Israel.*

What was true of the 18th and 19th centuries, also held true for the 20th century. Many leading British politicians such as Lord Balfour were anti-Semitic. So there was a fertile ground for anti-Semitism in Britain among Protestants. Therefore, it should not surprise anyone, that the zeal of Protestant Christianity to settle the Jews of Britain in the so-called Holy Land, had little to do with Christians affection for Judaism, but rather with their latent anti-Semitism and pure self-interests.

Yakov M. Rabkin is Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Montreal. He has been a visiting scholar at many universities around the world. He has written extensively on subjects such as science, technology, and ideology. His most acclaimed book, however, is “A Threat from Within: a Century of Jewish opposition to Zionism”, which has been nominated for Canada’s Governor-General Award, Israel’s Hecht Prize for Studies in Zionism and listed as one of the three best books of the year in Japan. This book has been translated into twelve languages.

In nine chapters, the author compares the Zionist claims to the Land of Israel (Eretz Israel) with rabbinical Jewish teachings. He shows that the Zionist narrative has little to do with Judaism. Leading representatives of Zionism have cherry-picked from Jewish tradition to incorporate it into Zionist mythology. John Rose calls in his book “The Myth of Zionism” David Ben-Gurion the “greatest myth-maker”. The “Land of Israel” claim, as made by the Zionists, has a totally different meaning in Judaism. “‘Promised land’ means, in fact, that it belongs not to the to whom the promise was made, but to the one who made the promise.”

To understand modern-day Israel, one should put Judaism and Jewish tradition aside because such a connection is misleading; for “Zionism and the state that incarnates it are

revolutionary phenomena". Such provocative theses are very numerous scattered all over Rabkin's book. It's easier to understand the policies and the structure of the State of Israel by leaving aside references to Jewish history. As a consequence, Rabkin suggests that one should speak of the State of Israel as a "Zionist state" rather than a "Jewish state". The same holds true for the Israel lobby, that should be designated as a "Zionist lobby" rather than a "Jewish lobby". Instead of delving into the religious mythology of Jewish history, Rabkin urged readers to analyze Israel within the context of international politics, Western interests and the resources of the Middle East.

"The Jews came to Zionism long after the Christians", states the author. Even Zionist leader Theodor Herzl was influenced by Christian protestant thinking. Herzl's wanted first to "solve the Jewish question" (Judenfrage) by having all Jews convert to Catholicism. The idea to gather all Jews in one location did not originate with Jews but in English and American Protestant circles. It was considered of "supreme importance to Christianity" writes Rabkin. Herzl got initially familiar with this idea through a Protestant clergyman from the British embassy in Vienna. Till today, Protestant support for Zionism continues to play a crucial role, which can be seen in the U. S. According to a Pew poll, 82 percent of WASPs (=White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) believe that God gave the State of Israel to the Jewish people, while only 42 percent of Jews share this belief, as Rabkin says.

For several decades, the Zionist national movement was associated in Western public opinion with leftist socialist ideas. For socialist internationalists, it was not natural to support a movement that the second pillar is nationalism, whose ideas rooted in Europe and were popularized by a "mere handful of assimilated Jews in Central Europe", said Rabkin. Consequently, many Jews rejected Zionism as a reactionary movement, leave alone orthodox Jews all across Europe. They rejected the Zionist agenda of return to the "Land of Israel" by "political means" as incompatible with "the idea of salvation in Jewish tradition", writes Rabin.

The most active Zionists in Palestine were Russians, who strove to build a new society. They wanted to build a socialist society but without the native Arabs. The word they mostly used was "separation". Along the socialist Zionists, the Jewish community in Palestine included political Zionists from France, Germany, and Austria, who brought with them a liberal-bourgeois world-view.

Rabkin stresses the importance of the Russian dimension within the Zionist movement and highlights the fact that modern day Israel can't be properly understood without accounting for the Jewish Russian influence. Jews from the Russian Empire formed the backbone of the Zionist colonial settlement enterprise in Palestine. Although there hasn't been any significant emigration from the Soviet Union to Palestine/Israel since the 1920s until the end the 20th Century, over 60 percent of Knesset members in the 1960s were of Russian origin or descent.

That's why it's no coincidence that the Netanyahu government gets along so well with Russian President Vladimir Putin, in particular, Moldova-born Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman. It should be added that common interests, smart diplomacy, and the esteem of the role of the nation-state are shared values between Israel and Russia.

According to Rabkin, for the majority of Zionists, "the Nazi genocide stands as the ultimate proof of the dangers that threaten Jews around the world". From the start, Zionism has been

seen, inter alia, as a movement to make anti-Semitism absolute by creating a State of the Jews, especially the right-wing Israeli government presents Israel as a reaction to this kind of racism. According to Rabkin, the emphasis on anti-Semitism seems a response to liberalism that attracts many Jews to settle in Israel who would otherwise not dare to emigrate to Israel. Israeli nationalistic leaders regularly tell world Jewry that Israel is the only place where Jews can live in security. i. e. in an “ethnocracy called the State of Israel”.

To speak about contemporary Jewish history, one has to deal with the Nazi genocide, writes Rabkin. The Nazi genocide is a constitutive part of Israeli Zionist identity. Zionists and religious orthodox Jews have drawn opposite conclusions from this horrific crime against humanity. “This tragedy has been transformed into a vector for national unity in Israel, and for Zionist allegiance in the Diaspora.” This transformation has given rise to serious critique among Israeli intellectuals. Although Zionists and their detractors agree on the hostility encountered by the Jews over the centuries, they differ on the reasons. Zionists generally explain “this hostility by the political and military weakness of the Jews, pious Jews tend to see it as a punishment for the sins committed by the Jews themselves”, so Rabkin.

Although only half of the world’s Jewish population lives in Israel, the Israeli political establishment pretends to speak on behalf of, and represent, all the world’s Jews. They claim that their Zionist state belongs to all Jews, while the native Palestinians have no legitimate place in the country. This view has also been stressed by David Ben-Gurion and the erstwhile Zionist labor movement. Rabkin rejects the criticism of the liberal Zionist that the current government has betrayed original Zionist intentions. Instead, he stresses the continuity of the Zionist state from its inception till this day. All the legitimate criticism of Israel and its negative image among the population in Western states, “Western elites lend it increasingly unconditional support”. As an example of this uncritical support, Rabkin cites the acceptance of Israel into the OECD, shortly after the Israeli Terrorist Forces (ITF) massacred 1 400 people in the Gaza Strip at the turn of 2008/2009.

What is modern about Israel, is not easy to say. It’s not that clear-cut than a first impression might imply. Although the State of Israel represents a high-tech society with a powerful military, that wields atomic weapons, it’s legitimacy is still questioned in the region. On the one hand, some segments of orthodox Jewry still does not recognize the Zionist State of Israel because they reject the nationalistic concept of the Jews; on the other hand, Palestinians – the victims of Zionist colonization – refuse to recognize Israel as a “Jewish” State as demanded by the Zionist ruling class. Even the question “who is Jewish” is still contentious within Israel. Is Israel a Jewish or a Zionist state? The author has opted for the latter because the gap between Zionism and Jewish history continues to exist and could not be bridged until today. All in all, the existence of the State of Israel is still in limbo.

Yacov Rabkin’s book demonstrates that Zionism is not the sequel of Judaism. That Israel is a “Jewish and democratic state” seems pseudo-religious dogma, designed only by believers. Although presenting provoking views, the book is convincingly and boldly argued. After “A Threat from Within: a Century of Jewish Opposition to Zionism”, this is another must read from the pen of a true scholar.

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