

Conflating Zionism and Judaism Leaves Jewish Students Exposed

'Israelism' has replaced traditional Jewish identity, making it difficult for Jewish students to distinguish between divergent political views and attacks on their identities.

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Featured image: Young Jews participating in the Taglit Birthright program at an event held at the International Conference Center in Jerusalem. January 4, 2012. (Source: Marc Israel Sellem/Flash90)

It is no secret that young Jews often find it difficult to separate Zionism from the Jewish identity as it has been taught to them. Their identity is often centered on political support for the State of Israel, and they see advocacy for Israel — a special course in the curriculum of many private Jewish schools — as a key part of being Jewish. Leaving the protective bubble of Jewish day schools for university campuses, therefore, can be traumatic.

Teaching the centrality of Israel, a policy that has been applied in most non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish schools for decades, has borne fruit. Graduates often feel that criticizing Israel's treatment of the Palestinians is a manifestation of anti-Semitism. Those feelings are genuine, and need not be simplified into attempts at conscious manipulation of anti-Semitism for political purposes.

In many synagogues, support for Israel has entered liturgy. The congregants' enthusiasm is palpable when they chant the blessing for the State of Israel and its armed forces, enthusiasm that seems missing in the traditionally central parts of the communal service such as the silent *amida* prayer. Many Jews have simply not noticed that their traditional religious and ethnic identity has morphed into a new political one. They support Israel financially, attend concerts by Israeli singers, and some even encourage their children to serve in the Israeli army. The existence of a state boasting a national flag, a powerful army, and a prosperous economy confers pride and a sense of involvement in something bigger than private life.

This vicarious "Israelism" has replaced the traditional Jewish identity — a shift that has been all the easier given the less demanding nature of the new identity. Since traditional Jewish identity is founded upon obedience to the Torah and to the precepts that it imposes, it impinges both on the private domain, such as food and intimate relations, and public conduct, including strict requirements of ethical behavior. Judaism articulates hundreds of ritual and moral duties. At the same time, *Israelism* carries with it no particular morality, no prohibition against oppressing the powerless, that the Torah repeatedly articulates. It breaks cleanly with the traditional ways of being Jewish.

Israel has come to embody military power, political clout and material success. At the same time, it raises serious moral concerns. The Israeli intellectual Boaz Evron asserts that

“moral identification with power politics is equivalent to idolatry,”[1]

while American theologian Marc Ellis considers that this same identification constitutes a “disaster” and reminds his readers that “collective pride implies collective guilt.”[2]

The idea of Jews opposing Zionism and Israel may appear as an oxymoron today. Some, however, remember that Zionism, a political movement, which emerged at the end of the 19th century in Europe, was opposed at the time by the vast majority of Jews — both religious and assimilated. The Balfour Declaration, which provided Britain’s support for Zionism, was bitterly denounced as anti-Semitic by Edwin Montagu, the only Jewish member of the British cabinet. Zionists, just as anti-Semites, postulated that Jews did not belong to the countries of their birth. Both disdained Diaspora Jews and found them degenerate, attributing to them many a negative stereotype. Theodor Herzl was well aware of this fact, confiding in his diary:

“The anti-Semites will become our most dependable friends, the anti-Semitic countries our allies.”

When my book on Jewish opposition to Zionism appeared first in French and then in more than a dozen languages, it was only the Hebrew publisher in Israel who subtitled it, “the story of a continuing struggle.” Indeed, most Israelis are aware that Jews, including many ultra-Orthodox residents of Jerusalem, continue to reject Zionism and refuse to enlist in Israel’s armed forces, for which many serve time in military prison. This is rarely mentioned, let alone taught, in Jewish schools.

Just as many Jews — and many more Evangelical Christians — ardently support Israel, quite a few Jews denounce Israel or its policies and support the Palestinians. Jews play a prominent role in the campaign for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) aiming to soften Israel’s policy towards the Palestinians. Nothing divides the Jews more than the question of Israel.

When identity politics supplants the politics of ideas, it is easy to mistake political opposition for discrimination. It is significant that those who impute anti-Semitism to pro-Palestinian movements on campuses often express admiration for the quality of Jewish life at their universities. Apparently, nobody prevents them from practicing Judaism and celebrating Jewish culture; it is their political views and actions that provoke rejection. Our society is politically diverse, and it is important to keep it this way — differentiating ethnic and religious bigotry from political disagreement. To do so, we must beware the diligently cultivated conflation between Judaism and Zionism.

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Notes

[1] Boaz Evron, *Jewish State or Israeli Nation*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1995, p. 253

[2] Marc Ellis, *O Jerusalem: The Contested Future of the Jewish Covenant*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1999, p. 52

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