

Gap among Jews widens on question of Zionism

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A profound division has developed between Zionist advocates of Israel and Jews, secular and religious, who reject or question Zionism and actions taken by the state of Israel. Public debate about Israel's place in Jewish continuity has become open and candid.

Many Jews try to come to terms with the contradictions between the Judaism they profess to adhere to and the Zionist ideology that has taken hold of them. This coincides with serious concerns expressed across Israel's political and religious spectrum about the future of Israel.

Quite a few Jews now publicly ask whether the chronically besieged ethnic nation-state in the Middle East is "good for the Jews." Many continue to be concerned that militant Zionism destroys Jewish moral values and endangers Jews in Israel and elsewhere. This debate has entered pop culture as well: The recent film *Munich* by Steven Spielberg sharply focuses on the moral cost of Israel's chronic reliance on force.

The Israel lobby in the United States, aligned with the nationalist right in Israel, viciously attacked the Jewish director and his film even before it was released. It also lashed out at several books published over the past few years – *Prophets Outcast*, *Wrestling With Zion*, *The Question of Zion*, *The Myths of Zionism* – all authored by Jews who are concerned about the same essential conflict between Zionism and Jewish values.

A few weeks ago, the Israel lobby (through its constituent American Jewish Committee) issued a report alleging that Jews who criticize Israel endanger its "right to exist" and foment anti-Semitism. This provoked a number of prominent Jews in Britain, Canada and the United States to speak out, moving candid debate about Israel into mainstream, even conservative, publications. In January, the eminently pro-establishment *Economist* published a survey of "the state of the Jews" and an editorial that called on rank-and-file Diaspora Jews to move away from the "my country, right or wrong" attitude adopted by many Jewish organizations.

Making a stand for Jewish emancipation from the state of Israel and its policies has bridged some old divides and created new ones. Thus, an ultra-Orthodox critic of Israel, usually antagonistic to Reform Judaism, commended a Reform rabbi for saying that "when Israel's Jewish supporters abroad don't speak out against disastrous policies that neither guarantee safety for her citizens nor produce the right climate in which to try and reach a just peace with the Palestinians ... they are betraying millennial Jewish values and acting against Israel's own long-term interests."

Their relationship with the state of Israel and with Zionism has polarized the Jews. The axis along which this polarization has taken shape does not correspond to any of the habitual divisions: Ashkenazi/Sephardic, observant/nonobservant, Orthodox/non-Orthodox. In each of

these categories are Jews for whom national pride, even arrogance (chutzpah), is a positive value, and who give their enthusiastic support to the state that incarnates what they identify as a life force, a triumph of the will and a guarantee of Jewish survival.

But each of these categories also includes Jews who believe that the very idea of a Jewish state, and the human and moral price that it demands, undermines all that Judaism teaches, particularly the core values of humility, compassion and kindness. They, along with Israel's staunchest supporters, point up the paradox that has seen Israel, often presented as an ultimate haven, become one of the most precarious places for Jews. Israeli media report unprecedented levels of concern not only for the future of the state but also for the physical survival of its inhabitants. Some attempt to redefine "Israel's national purpose" as a means to revitalize Israel's largely demoralized society.

Divisions about Israel and Zionism are so acute that they may split Jews as irremediably as did the advent of Christianity two millennia ago. Christianity, which embodies a Greek reading of the Torah, eventually broke away from Judaism. Like Christianity, Zionism, reflecting a nationalist, romantic reading of the Torah and Jewish history, has come to fascinate many Jews.

It remains to be seen whether the fracture between those who hold fast to Jewish moral tradition and the converts to Jewish nationalism may one day be mended. However fateful for Jews and Judaism, this fracture may not necessarily affect Israel, which nowadays counts many more evangelical Christians than Jews among its unconditional supporters.

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