

# Reclaiming Judaism from Zionism

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Jews in today's Israel must reconnect to Jewish heritage before it was distorted by Zionism. ([Ryan Rodrick Beiler](#))

When the [Zionist](#) movement appeared in Eastern Europe in the 1880s, it found it very difficult to persuade the leading rabbis and secular Jewish thinkers of the day to support it.

The leading rabbis saw the political history in the Bible and the idea of Jewish sovereignty on the land of Israel as very marginal topics and were much more concerned, as indeed Judaism as a religion was, with the holy tracts that focused on the relationship between the believers themselves and in particular their relations with God.

Secular liberal or socialist Jews also found the idea of Jewish nationalism unattractive. Liberal Jews hoped that a far more liberal world would solve the problems of persecution and anti-Semitism while avowed socialists and communists wished peoples of all religions, not just the Jews, to be liberated from oppression.

Even the idea of a particular Jewish socialist movement, such as the Bund, was a bizarre one in their eyes. "Zionists who were afraid of seasickness" is how Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov called the Bundists when they wanted to join the international communist movement.

The secular Jews who founded the Zionist movement wanted paradoxically both to secularize Jewish life and to use the Bible as a justification for colonizing Palestine; in other words, they did not believe in God but He nonetheless promised them Palestine.

This precarious logic was recognized even by the founder of the Zionist movement himself, Theodore Herzl, who therefore opted for Uganda, rather than Palestine, as the promised land of Zion. It was the pressure of Protestant scholars and politicians of the Bible, especially in Britain, who kept the gravitation of the Zionist movement towards Palestine.

## Map of colonization

For them it was a double bill: you get rid of the Jews in Europe, and at the same time you fulfill the divine scheme in which the second coming of the Messiah will be precipitated by the return of the Jews — and their subsequent conversion to Christianity or their roasting in hell should they refuse.

From that moment onwards the Bible became both the justification for, and the map of, the Zionist colonization of Palestine. Hardcore Zionists knew it would not be enough: colonizing the inhabited Palestine would require a systematic policy of ethnic cleansing. But portraying

the dispossession of Palestine as the fulfillment of a divine Christian scheme was priceless for galvanizing global Christian support behind Zionism.

The Bible was never taught as a singular text that carried any political or even national connotation in the various Jewish educational systems in either Europe or in the Arab world. What Zionism derogatorily called “Exile” — the fact that the vast majority of Jews lived not in Palestine but communities around the world — was considered by most religious Jews as an imperative existence and the basis for Jewish identity in modern time.

Jews were not asked to do all they can to end the “Exile” — this particular condition could have only been transformed by the will of God and could not be hastened or tampered with by acts such as the one perpetrated by the Zionist movement.

One of the greatest successes of the secular Zionist movement was creating a religious Zionist component that found rabbis willing to legitimize this act of tampering by claiming that the very act itself was proof that God’s will has been done.

These rabbis accepted the secular Zionist idea to turn the Bible into a book that stands by itself and conceded that a superficial knowledge of it became a core of one’s Jewishness even if all the other crucial religious imperatives were ignored.

These were the same rabbis who after the [1967 War](#) used the Bible as both the justification and roadmap for the judaization and de-Arabization of the occupied West Bank, including Jerusalem.

### Extreme nationalism

In the 1990s the two movements — the one that does not believe in God and the one that impatiently decides to do His work — have fused into a lethal mixture of religious fanaticism with extreme nationalism. This alliance formed in the Israeli crucible is mirrored among Israel’s Jewish supporters around the world.

And yet this development has not completely eclipsed the very same Jewish groups that rejected Zionism when it first appeared in the late nineteenth century: those who are called in Israel the Ultra-Orthodox Jews — abhorred and detested in particular by liberal Zionists — and purely secular Jews who feel alien in the kind of “Jewish State” Israel became.

A small number of the former — for example Neturei Karta — even profess allegiance to the Palestine Liberation Organization, while the vast majority of the Ultra-Orthodox express their anti-Zionism without necessarily offering support for Palestinian rights.

Meanwhile, some of the secular Jews try to relive the dreams of their European and Arab grandparents in the pre-Zionist era: that group of people made their way as individuals, and not as a collective, in the various societies they found themselves in; more often than not injecting cosmopolitan, pluralist and multicultural ideas if they were gifted enough to write or teach about them.

This new, and I should say inevitable, religious-nationalist mixture that now informs the Jewish society in Israel has also caused a large and significant number of young American Jews, and Jews elsewhere in the world, to distance themselves from Israel. This trend has become so significant that it seems that Israeli policy today relies more on Christian Zionists

than on loyal Jews.

It is possible, and indeed necessary, to reaffirm the pluralist non-Zionist ways of professing one's relationship with Judaism; in fact this is the only road open to us if we wish to seek an equitable and just solution in Palestine. Whether Jews want to live there as Orthodox Jews — something that was always tolerated and respected in the Arab and Muslim worlds — or build together with like-minded Palestinians, locals and refugees, a more secular society, their presence in today's Palestine is not by itself an obstacle to justice or peace.

Whatever your ethnicity is, you can contribute to the making of a society based on continued dialogue between religion and secularism as well as between the third generation of settlers and the native population in a decolonizing state.

Like all the other societies of the Arab world this one too would strive to find the bridge between past heritage and future visions. Its dilemmas will be the same as those which are now informing everyone who lives in the Arab world, in the heart of which lies the land of Palestine.

The society in Palestine and present-day Israel cannot deal with these issues in isolation from the rest of the Arab world, and neither can any other Arab nation-state created by the colonialist agreements forged in the wake of the First World War.

Distorted

For the Jews in today's Israel to be part of a new, just and peaceful Palestine, there is an imperative to reconnect to the Jewish heritage before it was corrupted and distorted by Zionism. The fact that this distorted version is presented in some circles in the west as the face of Judaism itself is yet another rotten fruit of the wish of some of the victims of nationalist criminality — as the Jews were in central and Eastern Europe — to become such criminals themselves.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are what believers choose them to be. In pre-Zionist Palestine, the choice was for living together in the same towns and villages in one complete existence. In the turn of the twentieth century, it was even moving faster towards a more relaxed way of living. But alas, that was the path not taken.

We should not lose hope that this is still possible in the future. We need to reclaim Judaism and extract it from the hands of the "Jewish State" as a first step towards building a joint place for those who lived and want to live there in the future.

*Editor's note: An earlier version of this article misattributed the quotation "Zionists who were afraid of seasickness" to Leon Trotsky rather than Georgi Plekhanov. It has since been corrected.*

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