

“Don't Talk Zionism!”

Uri Avnery

September 19, 2015

IN THE EARLY 1950S, I published a story by my friend, Miko Almaz. At the time, the new State of Israel was in dire straits, its leaders did not know how to pay for next month's food.

Someone remembered that in a remote part of Africa there was a small community of Jews, who owned all the diamond mines and were immensely rich. The government chose their most effective money-raiser and sent him there.

The man realized that the fate of the state was resting on his shoulders. He assembled the local Jews and gave them The Speech. About the pioneers who left everything behind to go to Palestine and make the desert bloom, about their back-breaking labor, about their lofty socialist ideals.

When he was finished, there was not a dry eye in the room. Returning to his hotel, he knew that he had given the speech of his life.

And indeed, the next morning a delegation of the local Jews knocked on his door. “Your words made us feel that we are leading an unworthy life,” they said. “A life of luxury and exploitation. So we decided unanimously to present the mines as a gift to our workers, leave everything and return with you to Israel to become pioneers!”

DAVID BEN-GURION was a real Zionist. He believed that a Zionist was a Jew who went to live in Eretz Israel. Even a president of the World Zionist Organization was not a Zionist, if he lived in New York. He was adamant in his convictions.

When he traveled to the United States for the first time as Prime Minister of Israel, he was asked by his advisors what his message would be. “I shall tell them to leave everything and come to Israel!” he retorted.

The advisors were shocked to the core. “But Israel needs their money!” they exclaimed. “We can't exist without it!”

A battle of consciences ensued. At long last Ben-Gurion was overcome. He went to America, told the Jews that they could be good Zionists if they donated generously to Israel and gave it their political support.

After that episode, Ben-Gurion was never the same again. His basic convictions had been destroyed.

The same happened to Zionism. It became a cynical slogan, to be used by anyone to push his or her agenda.

Mainly it became an instrument of the Israeli leadership to subjugate world Jewry and mobilize it for their national, partisan or personal aims.

To come back to the story: there could be no greater catastrophe than for world Jewry to pack up and come to Israel. The immense power of organized US Jewry, the vast majority of which gets its orders from Jerusalem, is essential to the existence of the state.

I WAS thinking about all this when I read, over the weekend, a thought-provoking essay by the popular leftist Israeli writer, A. B. Yehoshua, who is almost alone among top Israeli writers in not being an Ashkenazi. His father belonged to an old Sephardic family in Jerusalem, his mother is Moroccan. This makes him, in today's slang, a Mizrahi (“Easterner”).

In his essay Yehoshua makes a distinction between nationalism and Zionism. According to him, these two are not melded into one, as people in Israel are led to believe, but two different entities “welded” together and in constant conflict with each other. “Zionism” plays a dubious role in this duality.

In today's Israel, this is a daring theory, bordering on heresy. In ancient Rome, people were burned for less. Like saying that God and Jehovah are two different deities. But to my mind this is a construction of obsolete terms. By now, we can dare to think much further. Is Israeli nationalism really even welded to non-Israeli Zionism?

I MUST remind the reader again that to begin with, the great idea of Theodor Herzl had nothing to do with Zion, in the literal sense (a hill in Jerusalem).

Originally Herzl wanted a State-of-Jews (not “Jewish State”), in Patagonia, southern Argentina. The original population had just been eradicated, more or less, and Herzl thought that this empty country was fit for European Jewish mass settlement, after the remnants of the aborigines had been evicted (but only after they had killed off all wild animals).

When Herzl, a completely assimilated Viennese Jew, came into contact with real Jews, especially Russians, he realized reluctantly that nothing but Palestine would work. So his idea became Zionism. He never liked Palestine, never visited it, except once when he was practically or-

¹The Kaiser remarked afterwards that Zionism was a great idea, but that “it can't be carried out with Jews”.

dered to do so by the romantic German Kaiser, who insisted on meeting him in Jerusalem.¹

Herzl's idea of Zionism was quite simple: all the Jews in the world will come to the new state and be the only ones called Jews from then on. Those who prefer to remain where they are will cease to be Jews and finally become ordinary Austrians, Germans, Americans etc. End of story.

WELL, IT did not happen that way. Zionism was much too convenient an instrument for politicians—in Israel as abroad—to throw on the dung heap.

Everybody uses it. American politicians who lust after heaps of Jewish money. Israeli politicians who have nothing else to say. Israeli government officials of all stripes who openly discriminate against Israel's Arab citizens. Coalition Knesset members against the opposition. Opposition Knesset members against the government.

Let Binyamin Netanyahu call Yitzhak Herzog, the leader of the opposition, an “anti-Zionist”, and he will object more strongly than if he had been called a mere traitor. Anti-Zionist is awful. Unforgivable.

Yet if any one of these were asked what Zionism really is, he would stop dead in his tracks. Zionism—why, everybody knows what Zionism is. What a question! Zionism is er...er...er.

On the other side of the fence, the situation is much the same. Everybody accuses everybody of being a Zionist. You are for the two-state solution? A vicious Zionist plot! You don't want Israel to disappear? So you are part of the world-wide Zionist conspiracy.

To call someone a Zionist is to end the discussion. Like saying that he is a Nazi. Only worse. Much worse.

And then there are the remnants of classical anti-Semitism. What remains of the once proud movement that started it all. The very people Herzl met in the streets of Vienna and Paris, when he came to the logical conclusion that Jews could not live in 19th century Europe any longer.

That great anti-Semitic movement is gone. Only pathetic remnants survive. Just enough to provide Zionists with the fuel they need.

ZIONISM AS such, the real honest-to-goodness one, died an honorable death in Tel Aviv, the moment the State of Israel was founded.²

What remains is the co-existence of two separate entities, not really welded to each other, that are bound to break apart some time in the future.

Neither of them has much to do with Zionism.

There is the Israeli entity—a normal nation (at least as normal as any nation is). It has a motherland, a collective mentality, a geographical and political reality, economic interests, a majority language, internal problems galore. 75% of its population are Jews, 20% Arabs.³

And then there is world Jewry. Its homeland is the entire world. It belongs to many different nations, has some vague common interests (created by anti-Semites), a religion, many traditions. Large parts of it have a commitment to Israel, a vague one that can easily become more indistinct.

One of the main functions of “Zionism” is to keep this people totally subservient to the interests of Israel's current (and changing) leadership. Without this connection, Israel would have to exist on its own political, economic and military resources, a vastly reduced existence.

The bonds that bound these two entities together (or “welded”, according to Yehoshua) are religion and tradition. These days, when Jews all over the world and in Israel are celebrating the same “high holidays”, this is very obvious. The bonds are there, created over the centuries, but one may wonder how strong they really are today. How much stronger, if at all, than those between Irish-Americans and Ireland, or Singapore-Chinese and China? In a real test, how would they hold up?

Ironically enough, the most extreme faction of religious Jewry—both in Jerusalem and in Brooklyn—rejects Zionism as a sin against God.

THE REAL damage caused by the Zionist mental stranglehold on Israel is that it falsifies Israel's situation in the world.

The official designation of Israel as a “Jewish and democratic state” is an oxymoron. A Jewish state cannot really be democratic, since the definition denies equality to non-Jews, especially Arabs. For the same reason, a democratic state cannot be Jewish. It must belong to all its citizens.

But the problem is more profound. Israel's bonds with world Jewry are infinitely closer than its bonds with its neighbors. One cannot fix one's gaze on New York and also be profoundly interested in what people do in Baghdad, Damascus and Tehran.

Until Damascus and Tehran come so close that one cannot ignore them anymore. Ironically, people in Tehran shout “Death to the Zionist entity!” In the long run, what is happening there is a hundred times more important to our future than the Republican Party in San Francisco.

LET ME be clear: I don't preach Separation, as a small group nicknamed “Canaanites” once advocated. The natural bonds which are real and do not hurt the vital interest of either party—Israel or World Jewry—will survive.

But with one condition: that they will not hurt the future of Israel, a future which demands peace and friendship between its citizens and neighbors, or the future of the Jews throughout the world within their own nations.

How does that fit into the Zionist doctrine? Well, if it doesn't, too bad.

²In those days “Zionism” was a kind of joke among young people. “Don't talk Zionism!” meant “Don't talk high-faluting nonsense!”

³The rest are Jews who are not recognized as Jews by the rabbis, who decide such things in Israel.