

## A Nation Like All the Others

### *Shabbat Shof'tim 5784*

September 6, 2024

Rabbi Barry H. Block

Several months ago, I participated on a panel about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A Palestinian panelist noted that Palestinians, Jews and Christians lived together peacefully in Palestine before large waves of Jewish immigration began in the late 1800s.

He was telling the truth, as far as his statement went. However, only a small fraction of the world's Jewish population lived in Palestine at that time, a reality that proved fatal to millions of European Jews. My fellow panelist argued that the movement to bring Jews to Palestine was European colonialism, with disastrous consequences for the existing local population, just as it was in India and the Americas, for example.

This argument is grounded in twin convictions European Jews came up with Zionism in the late 1800s and are not indigenous to the Land of Israel. The latter assertion is antisemitic, denying the truth of Jewish history as clearly revealed in sacred text, archeology, and Jewish experience across the centuries. Jews never stopped praying for return to our sacred homeland after the Romans destroyed the Temple in the year 70, and there was always a Jewish presence in the Land.

Something **did** happen in the late 1800s, though, and it did not start with Jews. Historian William Eichler explains:

“During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European Christians began to identify” as members of a nation. That is, seeing oneself as French or Polish, German or Italian, was rather new in the 1800s. Now, though, “A new breed of nationalist... glorified the historic triumphs of their people, rejoicing in the distinctiveness of their language and culture, and eventually demanding the that their people become a nation-state.”<sup>i</sup>

The trouble for Jews, though, was that they were excluded, never considered French or Polish, Italian or Russian, but rather Jewish, by nationality. Eichler notes that Jews didn't get to choose between “their Jewish and, say, their Lithuanian identities. Antisemitism made that choice” for them. Jews were almost universally excluded from European nationalisms.<sup>ii</sup>

Eichler continues, “Zionism emerged from this world[, as some] Jewish thinkers concluded that the only way to secure their community would be to build a Jewish national home.” Eichler cites the example of an early Zionist, Leon

Pinsker, who argued that Jews would have to create their own national liberation, “the only way...we, too, would...live and be a nation like others.”<sup>iii</sup>

In this week’s Torah portion, in the section that Alice will read tomorrow, Moses anticipates that the Children of Israel, would want to be “like all the nearby nations,” specifically, in that case, by having a king, just like their neighbors.<sup>iv</sup>

A sage known as the Vilna Gaon, writing around the time of the American and French Revolutions, called that Israelite desire, to be like other nations, “blasphemy.”<sup>v</sup> We can well imagine why. Torah describes the Israelites’ neighbors as idolators and worse, and they often tormented the Israelites. The Vilna Gaon, though, might just as well have been writing about his own situation as a Jew in Vilna, now Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, but then in Poland. Jews there often faced horrific antisemitic persecution, and they understandably had a low regard for the people who oppressed them, their religion, and their nation. It’s unsurprising, therefore, that the Vilna Gaon would reject the notion of being like other nations.

A century later, when modern Zionists began advocating for a nation-state “like all the others,” most Orthodox Jews dismissed that, too, as blasphemy, a view that would persist until the Holocaust rendered that position untenable. They insisted that Jews would be different. God would establish any future Jewish sovereignty, entirely unlike the other nations.

Those Orthodox critics of Modern Zionism were not alone. The founding rabbis of American Reform Judaism opposed Zionism in language that echoes a desire not to be like other nations. In 1885, they wrote: “We recognize, in the modern era . . . , the approaching realization of [the Jewish people’s] great Messianic hope for the establishment of the [sovereignty] of truth, justice, and peace among all [people]. We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine . . . nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.”<sup>vi</sup> In short, these rabbis, mostly immigrants to what they considered a golden land of promise, believed that antisemitism would soon vanish among all the world’s ills. No Jewish state would be needed, since Jewish Americans would be Americans like their neighbors, distinctive in religion only, not a separate nation comparable to America itself.

By 1936, with an increasing sensitivity to violent European antisemitism—and the stubborn persistence of antisemitism in America, too—the Reform position had shifted. In the wake of Hitler’s rise to power in Germany, American Reform Rabbis wrote: “In the rehabilitation of Palestine, the land hallowed by memories and hopes, we behold the promise of renewed life for many of our [people]. We

affirm the obligation of all Jewry to aid in its upbuilding as a Jewish homeland by endeavoring to make it not only a haven for the oppressed but also a center of Jewish culture and spiritual life.” These 1930s Reform rabbis did not speak of a state, certainly not “like all the others,” a point they drove home, proclaiming: “Throughout the ages, it has been [the Jewish people’s] mission to witness to the Divine in the face of every form of paganism and materialism. We regard it as our historic task to cooperate with all [humanity] in the establishment of the [rule] of God, of universal [friendship,] justice, truth, and peace on earth. This is our Messianic goal.”<sup>vii</sup>

If those pre-Holocaust Reform rabbis had their way, the Jewish homeland would be a nation unlike any other. Naziism proved that the nation-state had failed. They used the word “homeland,” leaving open the possibility of a non-state entity that would be a refuge for oppressed Jews, a view forwarded even by some who called themselves Zionist in that day.

That messianic hope would fade, of course, with the Holocaust and the British refusal to permit immigration to Palestine of Jews seeking refuge from the Nazis—a refusal, I hasten to add, demanded by Palestinians, whose leader was allied with Hitler. Yes, I’m speaking of the same Palestinians whom my fellow panelist described as living at peace with Jews a century earlier. That only lasted as long as Jews were a small, powerless, impoverished minority. Now, though, the Jewish people needed a nation-state with borders, a government, and the army that would be required to secure the safety of the Jewish people.

In the wake of October 7, Jewish people and our friends worldwide insist that Israel has a right to defend itself, “like any other nation.” At the same time, as early as the afternoon of October 7, enemies of the Jewish people blasted Israel as a settler-colonial state, deserving of massacre, with any retaliation branded “genocide.” Nations with infinitely worse human rights records, meanwhile, escape the world’s opprobrium. Antisemitism has not vanished, but the Jewish people is now protected by a powerful standing army.

Still, the dream of my predecessors, those Reform rabbis of 1936, inspires. לוי יהי, **if only** Israel did not have to be a nation like all the others. לוי יהי, **if only** we could believe that we live in a pre-messianic era—universal peace, solidarity, and justice close at hand. Rather than despair, though, let us recall that the prophets who foretold a future era of perfect peace lived in times more stricken even than our own. Still, they prayed, לא ישא גוי אל גוי חרב לא ילמדו עוד מלחמה, “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”<sup>viii</sup> Let their prayer now be ours.

Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> William Eichler, “Herzl’s Troubled Dream: The Origins of Zionism,” *History Today*, Volume 73, Issue 6, June 2023, <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/feature/herzls-troubled-dream-origins-zionism>.

<sup>ii</sup> Eichler.

<sup>iii</sup> Eichler.

<sup>iv</sup> Deuteronomy 17:14

<sup>v</sup> Aderet Eliyahu to Deuteronomy 17:14.

<sup>vi</sup> Declaration of Principles, known as “The Pittsburgh Platform,” Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1885, <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-declaration-principles/>.

<sup>vii</sup> The Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism, “The Columbus Platform,” Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1936, <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-guiding-principles-reform-judaism/>.

<sup>viii</sup> Isaiah 2:4.