

ZIONISM TODAY (Baruch Cohon)

For the first half of the 20th century Zionism was a political movement. It succeeded. The State of Israel exists. Millions of Jews now live there and call it home, still arriving daily from Russia, Yemen, Argentine, Cochin, Tunisia, South Africa, the United States, Australia, France, Japan, Costa Rica, and wherever we can imagine. In effect, they graduated from being Zionists to being Israelis.

When my daughter was in her teens, she and other American students were taken to Sde Boker to meet David Ben-Gurion. Somebody asked him about Zionism, and he surprised them all when he said “I’m not a Zionist.” How could the first Prime Minister of Israel not be a Zionist? Then he explained: “I’m not a Zionist, I live here. Come and join me.”

During that first half of the 20th century, Zionism was the subject of angry debates. Strict traditionalists insisted that only the Messiah can restore the Jewish people to their land, a position still held by the Neturei Karta who refuse to recognize the Israeli State, even though they themselves live in Jerusalem. On the other side, Classical Reform dropped from the liturgy any prayers for the return to Zion, holding that we have a spiritual homeland, namely our faith, and we should forget the whole idea of Exile and just be loyal citizens of whatever country we inhabit. Labor Zionists combined nationalist and Socialist ideas, and became a powerful influence among the pioneers in the Yishuv. Religious Zionists ardently supported a political movement that increasingly looked like the only avenue to a Jewish future. And humorists came up with a definition that triggers a lot of memories: “A Zionist is a Jew who collects money from another Jew so that a third Jew can move to Jerusalem.”

In 1897 Theodor Herzl convened the first Zionist Congress. For the next 50 years these debates raged. World War I toppled the Ottoman Empire and the Holy Land went from a Turkish Sanjaq to a British protectorate. Over succeeding decades the British government took alternating positions on the very idea of permitting Jewish immigration. World War II and the alliance between Nazi and Arab enemies failed to soften British policy. A ship bearing Holocaust survivors made history by sailing from Odessa to Haifa, defying British blockades. But during all this time, determined men and women were exerting prodigious effort to build Kibbutzim and Moshavim and a modern metropolis called Tel Aviv. When the British finally came up with a partition plan for their protectorate, they took a look

at what was going on there and set a pattern: east of the Jordan for the Arabs, west of the Jordan for the Jews. By 1948, the great “ex-Zionist” David Ben-Gurion would declare independence and the fledgling United Nations would recognize the State of Israel.

That was the end and fulfillment of Zionism, right? So why do we still see a World Zionist Organization? Why a Zionist Organization of America? What is Zionism today? Is the debate still going on?

As political history, we must recognize that pro- or anti-Zionism today is an anachronism. Theoretical debates on this subject are obsolete. Yet as a vehicle for Jew-hatred, our enemies like to call their position anti-Zionism. What they really want is to destroy the State of Israel and massacre its Jewish citizens. So pro-Israel forces hang onto the Zionist name.

Today, therefore, Zionism is not a political cause. It is a synonym for survival. Personally, I was not raised on Zionism. That condition freed me from many a debate. But today, forget debates. We need to do what the poet Hayyim Nachman Bialik sang about in his day: “Strengthen the hands of our brothers who till the soil of our land, where they are!” Call it Zionism if you want. I call it Unity.