

ZIONISM, and ISRAEL, (RE)CONSIDERED

For the second time on a Rosh Hashanah morning, I am considering the name Israel and the term Zionism. These reflections are prompted by a confluence of dynamics - global, communal and personal.

I am strongly motivated to articulate a vision of engagement with, and love for Israel the place, and Tzion the concept, that doesn't necessarily mean supporting the policies of the country's current government, or even the actions of its founding politicians and generals. And the uses – and abuses – of the term Zionism are so varied that it is virtually impossible to say definitively what Zionism *is*, beyond studying the primary documents of its first visionaries more than a century ago to glean what it *was*, at its birth and earliest stages.

I want to help frame the conversations we will undertake in community, where divisions quickly arise, flare up, and smolder, between those perceived as pro-Israeli policy and therefore comfortably pro-Israeli state, and those so thoroughly offended by the truly unacceptable choices of the government vis-à-vis the inhabitants of the occupied territories that no positive consideration of the state is possible.

I am motivated, and profoundly challenged, to help us examine what we call ourselves, to find meaning and most of all, connection, in addressing the challenges we face when examining our relationship with Israel.

I am further motivated to situate that vision in the light of our Torah's stories about land, people, legacy and values. I begin then, where I seem to always begin, at the beginning, at the first depiction of human existence in Torah, *betzelem elohim*.

I passionately believe in the dignity of the human person as embedded in the roots of Judaism, and expressed in the image *betzelem elohim*. I also believe it is my right and responsibility to forge, retain and hold up a connection, as a Jew, and a Jewish leader, in the Diaspora, to the state of Israel as a state for the Jewish people. How do I do those two things when the actions of that state's belie my deeply held Jewish belief?

Our conflict lies with all those fundamentalists, Jews or Christians, who seek the absolute manifestation of our peoples' history, as they read the Hebrew bible. Our conflict lies with those fundamentalists, Muslims or academic, who urge the outright rejection of our peoples' history, according to their voices of

authority. Our allegiance, our coalitions, our dialogue and our commitment must be with all those who look to a future of human dignity for all in the land, and not simply to uphold a simplistic and blinkered realization of the biblical *brit*.

I bring to you today a new term, a way perhaps to bridge the gap between revulsion and adulation of Israel and *Tzion*.

“I am a neo-Zionist. I adhere to my right, my responsibility and my vision to the State of Israel as the state of the Jewish people. I also am a democrat whose values for fairness, equality, dignity, tolerance, and mutual respect are deeply imbedded in Jewish traditions, texts, heritage and learning.”

Those were not my words, but a declaration by Gershon Baskin, an American-born Israeli Jew who is the Israeli Co-Director and founder of the Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI) - a joint Israeli-Palestinian public policy think tank. Dr. Baskin initiated the founding of IPCRI in 1988 following ten years of work in the field of Jewish-Arab relations within Israel.

Baskin's voice continues, resonating profoundly with my own values and analysis:

“The most significant and dangerous obstacle in our ability to reconcile peace with our neighbors is the continuation of the

adherence to the archaic modes of our yearnings for Zion expressed by settling the hilltops surrounding Palestinian towns, villages and cities that turn the lives of the Palestinians into a daily hell.

“This is not what Zionism was to suppose to be about. This is not the national liberation movement of the Jewish people that sought freedom and dignity, prophetic Jewish expression in daily life and safety and security for Jews all over.” *

Baskin calls himself a neo-Zionist. Don't be put off by the particle neo-. It simply means new, or recent. In and of itself it does not hold negative connotation. But for some of you, *any* form of Zionism does.

I am helped by Baskin in grasping that Zionism does not equal zealotry, any more than it inherently equals racism, any more than the rights of any indigenous group or nation to self-determination does so. It is a trap of empty righteousness to simply reject, disdain or deplore the policies of the current government of the state of Israel, or even past policies, practices or victories, and thereby situate oneself outside of the need to engage in a relationship with that place and all its peoples. It is a trap of empty righteousness to identify with the unacceptable suffering of the Palestinian without

grappling with the Jewishness of the state of Israel, along with our connection *to* and responsibility *for* its Jewishness.

Some of you feel detached from the sense of peoplehood and roots intrinsic to that place, like much of the secular left in Israel, and most of secular society in general. They are simply “Israeli,” a cosmopolitan nation that is situated on a tiny strip of land alongside the Mediterranean Sea and happens to speak Hebrew.

One of the profound challenges of Israel today is the invigoration and renewal of the Jewishness of the state, and by that I do not mean the *Orthodox* Jewishness of the state. We in the Diaspora have a tremendously important role to play in that challenge, a role that involves teaching as well as learning.

We are praying here today in the language and telling the stories of the ancestors we share with our Israeli sisters and brothers, with the sancta and canon passed down *ledor vador*/from generation to generation, beginning with our peoples’ experiences in that land. Along with a rising generation of newly-engaged Israelis studying Torah and praying together, we are doing it not as strictly interpreted by *halakha* but engaged with and informed by it. We must be no less engaged with and informed by Zionism and the Jewish state.

We must concern ourselves with questions of justice for all in that land of our ancestry – for the dignity of desperately poor remnant of living Holocaust survivors and desperately deprived elderly and children living on both sides of the green line; for those Arab Palestinians who cannot harvest their olive trees without risking their lives at the hands of fanatical Jewish settlers, and for those Israeli Jews who risk their lives guarding the rights of the harvesters, to name just a few identifiable groups struggling there for justice and dignity.

Late this summer, the Baltimore Board of Rabbis set to work on a High Holy Day message to the community on Israel, noting in particular that 5768 is the year of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the state. I sit as the lone Reconstructionist representative on the six-person committee that drafts such statement for the board.

We were all first invited to pool our suggestions for core texts or points we might wish to see included. I immediately forwarded two paragraphs from the Israeli Declaration of Independence, which some of us have studied together here at Beit Tikvah.

As the first draft was formed, it had an underlying sentiment that I was not cheery about endorsing, but without any glaring violations of my personal bottom lines, I was prepared to sign on. That hope

for ease of process was quickly dashed, when, just prior to our deadline, a new draft crossed my screen, with an additional comment punctuating each paragraph of the declaration that can only be described as virulently anti-Arab; other passages were deleted by this hand, others altered.

I had no choice. I indicated to the chair of the committee that the statement in this form should not go ahead, but if it did, it would be compelled to withdraw my name and participation. I want you to know that this was not a prospect I relished, not because I don't like to take a stand, but because I take seriously the need the teaching from *Pirkey Avot*, "do not separate yourself from the community," along with the charge you have entrusted me with, to represent Beit Tikvah to, and within, the Baltimore Jewish community.

My colleague managed to edit the document enough to address my specific concerns. I'm not thrilled with the result. It is not my personal statement. Some of you may have seen it, and profoundly disagreed with it in part or in sum; other may be quizzical, or even dismayed, that there should be any controversy about its content.

Let me again offer the voice of Gershon Baskin:

“... [W]hat I believe and want for Israel and the Jewish people is the fulfillment of the vision of the Declaration of Independence.

“I want to be a free people in my nation living in peace with my neighbors both within and along our borders. I cherish diversity and appreciate the wealth of cultural pluralism that we can experience in this land and in this region. I don't want to rule over another nation and don't want their land. If important parts of my heritage and history are on the other side beyond our borders, I may want to visit them. But I don't now have to be in possession of those places or rule over others in order to control them.

“Many of those holy places are also holy for others who live in this land and who have other beliefs. Judaism teaches us to sanctify life, not places. The Zionist dream is a political expression of the sanctification of life. If we are worthy of living in this land we must respect all its peoples. We must recognize that our own security and prosperity is dependent on the security and prosperity of both peoples of this land. If we want dignity and respect for ourselves and our dreams, we must give dignity and respect to the others.” **

As we move forward in learning together about Israel in the months and years ahead, I offer before you my own experience of engagement with, and love for, the country of Israel, nurtured and sustained without any love for the policies of its government; a connection to the language, culture, history and people of that place, including my own family; and a commitment to shape and shepherd a culture of dialogue and respect among us.

There are members of this congregation who are deeply critical of the occupation and support a two state solution. There are members of this congregation who are deeply engaged with Israel as a country and support it fully. Both of these points of view, and other nuanced positions, shall continue to exist within this *kehillah kodesh*/sacred community and in the Jewish community at large.

As we engage in learning and dialogue, may we be able to hear the voices of our ancestors, the core from which emanates the shape of our peoplehood, the wellspring that feeds our identities, our rituals, our call to embrace that which is holy and life-affirming in all persons and all peoples. May we be prepared to hear all of the voices within our gates, listening to each other with care, learning from each other with respect.

I close with the art of the poet. Again, I bring you the words of Yehuda Amichai, beloved artist of the Hebrew language to me, and to many here and across the ocean that both divides and connects us.

The Place Where we are Absolutely Right

From the place where we are absolutely right, flowers will never grow in the spring.

The place where we are absolutely right is trampled, hardened, like a courtyard.

However doubts and loves make the world rise like dough.

So does a mole, so does a plow.

And a whisper will be heard

in the place where a home (bayit: Temple) was destroyed.

--Yehuda Amichai

* Gershon Baskin, "Why I Am a Neo-Zionist" The Jerusalem Post July 31, 2007 <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1185789792287&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

** Gershon Baskin, The True Meaning of Zionism, August 1, 2005 http://www.zionism-israel.com/true_zionism.htm