

Yakov Rabkin¹

Judaic Challenges to the Legitimacy of Israel

¹ Université de Montréal, Montreal, Canada, E-mail: yakov.rabkin@umontreal.ca**Abstract:**

Legitimacy implies the existence of a framework within which it is assessed. The framework chosen for this paper is the religion of Judaism. This is, of course, contingent on the assumption that the state of Israel is related to Judaism, whatever its stream. Both the founding fathers of Zionism and their detractors emphasized the discontinuity and the revolutionary nature of the new political movement in Jewish history. Traditional leaders of Judaism almost unanimously condemned Zionism as an alien and perfidious import. They refused it all legitimacy. However, the policy of centrality of Israel exported around the world by Israeli educators for several decades has borne fruit. Many Jews find it difficult to separate Zionism from the Jewish identity as it has been taught to them. Their identity is often centred on political support for the State of Israel, and they see advocacy for Israel — a special course in the curriculum of many private Jewish schools — as a key part of being Jewish. The question of Israel divides the Jews more than any other. In view of the vast diversity of views, Judaic legitimacy of Israel depends of the kind of Judaism in question. In terms of traditional Judaic scholarship, espoused by most Haredim, Zionism and the state that embodies it are at best irrelevant to their Judaism. Yet, more modernized Jewish communities embrace the centrality of Israel with a lot of emotion. They cannot imagine a Judaism without Israel. In their often romantic view of Israel they cannot understand how a pious Jew can live in Jerusalem and remain intransigent in his rejection of Zionism.

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“We are telling the world that it doesn’t matter what the nations of the world say. The time has come to express our biblical right to the land.”

Gilad Erdan

Minister of Public Security, Strategic Affairs and Minister of Information

1 Introduction

The state of Israel has faced many challenges to its legitimacy. This paper focuses on contestations articulated from the viewpoint of Judaism, a religion with many streams, tendencies and traditions. Some of them will be briefly identified in order to facilitate the understanding of the challenges discussed. The paper begins with an outline of the place of the Land of Israel in Judaism. It then proceeds to recapitulate the origins of Zionism, a political ideology which led to the establishment of the state of Israel and continues to shape its character through legislation, public policies and education. The third part of this paper analyses Judaic challenges to Zionism as an ideology and, later, to the actual state of Israel. It concludes with a discussion of the evolution of these challenges and of the current trends in the relationship between Judaism and the state of Israel.

The question of Israel divides the Jews more than any other. In view of the vast diversity of views, Judaic legitimacy of Israel depends on the framework within which it is assessed. The framework chosen for this paper is that of Judaism, mostly its Orthodox and Reform branches. This is, of course, contingent on the assumption that the state of Israel is somehow related to Judaism. Judaic legitimacy could be based on the concept of *daat torah*, “the opinion of the Torah”, used in certain Orthodox circles, rather than on decisions in matters of Judaic law. A broader way of approaching the question of Judaic legitimacy of the Zionist state is to look at major trends in contemporary Judaism. One may recall that issues of geopolitical nature remained outside the realm of *halakha* (Judaic law) for nearly two millennia, with its adjudicators usually dealing with issues within the confines of Jewish homes and communities.

Israeli Prime Ministers, beginning with the founding father David Ben Gurion (1882–1973) and including the present holder of office have affirmed the legitimacy of Israel as “the Jewish state”. All of them have been irreligious, which has not prevented them from pointing at the Bible as the definitive source of legitimacy of the Zionist state. An Israeli scholar summarized the Zionists’ claim on the land very succinctly: “God does not exist and he promised us this land.” (Raz Krakotzkin 2004)

Yakov Rabkin is the corresponding author.

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Since the gradual retirement of old-time principled atheists from the Israeli establishment, the emphasis on “the Jewish character of the state” has steadily intensified. In May 2017, a bill to declare the State of Israel “a Jewish state” cleared one of the Israeli parliament’s committees and, at the time of this writing, is headed for a plenary vote. Moreover, this legislative initiative reflects a steady move in the public mood towards more assertive and exclusive Jewish nationalism, often invoking references to the Torah. Today’s leaders of Israel confidently assert their vision of Israel, admitting, in contradistinction to the Declaration of Independence, that human rights and equality would suffer in the Jewish state of their making. This is why the question of Judaic legitimacy acquires even greater relevance today.

The state of Israel, established in 1948, embodies the Zionist idea. To be more precise, it embodies the stream of Zionist thought that ultimately triumphed, virtually casting into oblivion those who wanted Palestine to become a spiritual centre (Ahad 1897) rather than a political state as well as those, including prominent intellectuals such as Martin Buber, Judah Magnes and Albert Einstein, who argued for establishing a binational state or, in today’s parlance, “a state of all its citizens” (Maor 2013). The ideological stream of Zionism, which ultimately prevailed, was a nationalist movement, led by Jews of Eastern European origin, in contradistinction to Western Jews who advanced the idea of a liberal Arab-Jewish state.

The programme of separate national development promoted by these East European settlers pursued four goals: 1) to transform the transnational Jewish identity centered on the Torah into a national identity like that of other European nations; 2) to develop a new vernacular language, or a national language, based on Biblical and rabbinical Hebrew; 3) to displace the Jews from their countries of origin to Palestine; and 4) to establish political and economic control over Palestine.

Zionism is a political movement established at the end of the nineteenth century while Zionist settlers began arriving in Palestine, mostly from the Russian Empire. But it was the support of the British Empire that resulted crucial for the creation of a Zionist settlement separate from the Palestinian majority in social, cultural and economic terms (Segev 2000). Based on the secular national definition of the Jew, the founding fathers of Zionism aimed at building a new country and a new man, embodying a popular Zionist slogan: *livnot u-lehibanot*, to build and to be built. Zionism was an overt challenge to most of the then existing streams of Judaism.

2 Land of Israel in Jewish tradition

According to classical Judaic sources, the Jews’ relationship with the Land of Israel is different from that of a Frenchman with France, or a Russian with Russia. Tradition asserts that it was the giving of the Torah, believed to be written or inspired by God, was the “birth of the people of Israel.” This happened at Mount Sinai, far from the Land of Israel. What came to distinguish the Hebrews as a group was not a common land but a commitment to the precepts of the Torah. While the Torah itself contains abundant episodes of transgression and forgetfulness on the part of the children of Israel, their defining, normative relationship with the Torah shaped for millennia their identity: “Judaism has always been greater than the sum of its adherents. Judaism created the Jew, not the other way round. [...] Judaism comes first. It is not a product but a program, and the Jews are the instrument of its fulfilment.” (Johnson 1987, 582) This is what makes the Jews a “chosen people,” a concept that implies moral and ritual responsibilities rather than intrinsic superiority.

Moreover, the relationship with the Land of Israel that Torah stipulates is asymmetrical. Whatever its qualities, the Holy Land cannot make a Jew holy; but his or her transgressions can profane the Land, which, in a case of manifest collective punishment, may “vomit” the entire people out:

Beware, lest your heart be misled, and you turn away and worship strange gods and prostrate yourselves before them. And the wrath of the Lord will be kindled against you, and He will close off the heavens, and there will be no rain, and the ground will not give its produce, and you will perish quickly from upon the good land that the Lord gives you (Deuteronomy 11: 16–17)

Exile in Jewish tradition is above all a state of spiritual incompleteness, a loss of contact with divine presence and moral failure, rather than simple expatriation from a physical location. Accordingly, the Land of Israel should be acquired by means of doing good deeds as an antidote to the misbehaviour, which, insist classical Judaic sources, is the prime cause of exile. Moreover, the eventual return to the land should be part of a messianic project and thus become irreversible because brought about directly by God.

A good example of this understanding of exile is one of the prayers recited at all Orthodox synagogues on the occasion of major festivals:

O God, God of our fathers, because of our sins we have been exiled from our land and sent far from our soil [...] Draw our scattered ones near, from among the nations, and bring in our dispersions from the

ends of the earth. Bring us to Zion, Your City, in glad song, and to Jerusalem, home of Your sanctuary, in eternal joy. (Scherman and Zlotowitz 1986, 679)

Even though millions of Jews now live in Israel, no adjustments have been made to the Orthodox prayer books, which suggests that the messianic hope and the postal address are two different things.

The Talmud explicitly lists conditions of the eventual return to the Holy Land (Babylonian Talmud: Talmud Bavli 2000, 111a). It focuses on three oaths sworn to God on the eve of the expulsion: not to return *en masse* and by force to the Land of Israel, not to rebel against the nations, and that the nations should not oppress the people of Israel to excess. Some argue that the three oaths are now invalid. The violation by the Nazis of the third oath would have, the argument runs, cancelled the first two. But, runs the counter-argument, an oath sworn to God is not the same as a simple agreement between two parties based on reciprocity.

Historians of Judaism agree that the legal interpretation of the three oaths is not an anti-Zionist innovation (Ravitzky 1996, 18). It is not something invoked occasionally, but forms an integral part of Jewish continuity, with deep roots in classical Judaic literature. For generations, well before the emergence of Zionism, scholars enjoined the Jews to accept the yoke of exile, and their recourse to the three oaths precedes the emergence of political Zionism by many centuries. The three oaths underlay the warnings against settling in Palestine issued by Spanish rabbis during the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula in the late fifteenth century. Many headed for the Ottoman lands, but very few took up residence in the Land of Israel, even though Palestine belonged then to the Ottoman Empire, which extended to a generous welcome to Spanish Jews exiled from their country. Centuries later, even two Judaic scholars often considered spiritual precursors of Zionism, the Ashkenazi Rabbi Zevi Hirsch Kalisher (1795–1874) and the Sephardi Yehuda Alkalai (1798–1878) referred to the three oaths. They lent their support to the colonization of the Holy Land but discouraged all messianic activism.

A parable explains the logic underlying the longing for messianic salvation:

God has exiled us on account of our sins, and exile is as a hospital for the Jewish people. It is inconceivable that we take control of our land before we are completely cured. God keeps and protects us, and administers to us His “medicinal” trials in perfect measurement and dosage. We are certain that when we are completely healed of our sins, God will not hesitate for a moment, and will deliver us to Him. How could we be in such haste to leave hospital in the face of mortal danger? What we seek of deliverance is that our cure be complete; we seek not to return in ill health to the royal palace, God forefend. (Rosenberg 1984–1987 2, 441)

Yet, return to the Land of Israel and the rebuilding of Jerusalem occupy a central place in Judaic liturgy, both in its Orthodox and Conservative varieties.

Reform Judaism, which emerged in Germany in early nineteenth century, largely abandoned the traditional messianic hope for redemption. Moreover, several prominent Reform rabbis affirmed that belief in Emancipation and social integration in the countries of their residence displaced the old yearning for a foreign land. At the inauguration of the first Reform synagogue in the United States, in Charleston, SC, in 1841, the presiding rabbi declared: “This house of worship is our Temple, this city our Jerusalem, this country our Palestine” (Ross 2011, 9).

Interpreting traditional Judaic texts as a call to national liberation or to political and military activism would seem to distort their traditional meaning. Advocates of Zionism enumerate references to Jerusalem in Orthodox prayers and in the grace after the meal in order to legitimize Israeli control over the Holy City. Conversely, in Jewish tradition these references mean the abandonment of all pretence to earthly power and an appeal for divine mercy, which, alone, can bring about messianic redemption.

The political analyst and secular Zionist Shlomo Avineri remarked:

[...] for all its emotional, cultural and religious intensity, this link with Palestine did not change the praxis of Jewish life in the Diaspora: Jews might pray three times a day for the deliverance that would transform the world and transport them to Jerusalem, but they did not emigrate there; they could annually mourn the destruction of the Temple on Tishah be-Av [the ninth day of the month of Av according to the Jewish calendar] and leave a brick over their door panel bare as a constant reminder of the desolation of Zion, but they did not move there. (Avineri 1981, 3)

A yawning chasm thus opened between the historic sensibilities of Jewish tradition and the revolutionary zeal of the East European Zionist settlers, who drew their inspiration primarily from romantic nationalism developed in Central Europe, far, both culturally and geographically, from Ottoman Palestine they came to occupy at the turn of the twentieth century.

On the origins of Zionism

Zionism was an idea that, for the majority of Jews, appeared innovative and bold. The founders of Zionism saw their movement as a revolution, a clean break with Rabbinic Judaism that had shaped the Jews for nearly two millennia. Moreover, Jews came to Zionism long after Christians. The translation of the Bible into vernacular languages during the Reformation, and primarily its English version, encouraged the belief that “the ingathering of the Hebrews in the Holy Land” would bring about the return of Jesus to Earth, precipitate the Apocalypse and the ultimate triumph of Christendom, which would be signalled by the mass conversion of the Jews. No wonder that when Joseph Priestly (1733–1804), a prominent scientist and philosopher, attempted to convince British rabbi David Levi (1740–1799) to organize a transfer of Jews to Palestine, the rabbi rejected the idea of reinstating the Jews in the Holy Land by material means and affirmed that the Jews must accomplish their mission in their countries of residence (Sharif 1986, 39).

Britain’s strategic considerations in the region also played a role in the consolidation of the Zionist idea. In 1841, the Colonial Times of London published a “Memorandum to the Protestant Monarchs of Europe” calling for the return of the Jews to Palestine (Friedman 1992, XVI). In 1845 the Colonial Office began to draft plans for a British protectorate that would become an independent Hebrew State (Sharif 1986, 58). These plans included the deportation of the local populations to create “living space” for the future immigrants. Drawn up by British statesmen, this variant of Zionism amply preceded the movement founded by Theodore Herzl (1860–1904) in 1897. But there is a link between the two.

A Protestant visionary by the name of William Hechler (1845–1931), the Anglican chaplain at the British Embassy in Vienna, befriended Herzl and encouraged him to gather the Jews in the Promised Land. Hechler thus became the “prophet” who inspired Herzl, the “prince,” in his project for the salvation of the Jews. As the former vice-mayor of Jerusalem André Chouraqui (1917–2007) noted, Herzl’s program was of Protestant inspiration:

“without the firm hand of Hechler who recognized him and opened for him the first doors—the most crucial—might not Herzl, like Moses before the burning bush, like Jonas upon hearing the call, have been tempted to flee, to escape his destiny?” (Duvernoy 1973, 3–4)

This goes far to explain the powerful support the state of Israel enjoys in the United States, where Evangelical Protestants - many times more numerous than all the Jews in the world - carry political weight. A graphic illustration of this fact was the invitation extended by President Trump to prominent Christian Zionists to take part in the recent inauguration of the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem (Feldman 2018).

Zionism resulted from the unease of certain intellectuals of Jewish descent in Central Europe who faced social challenges in spite of officially enacted Emancipation and their own efforts to assimilate to the ambient society. Their attempts at assimilation had failed to produce the anticipated social and psychological benefits, and particularly to gain them the satisfaction of total acceptance, which, in any case, remains highly subjective if not outright illusory. In other words, “Zionism was an invention of intellectuals and assimilated Jews... who turned their back on the rabbis and aspired to modernity, seeking desperately for a remedy for their existential anxiety” (Barnavi 2000, 218).

Historians of Zionism emphasize that the founders of this movement all emerged from among the assimilated Jews:

They did not come from the traditional religious background. They were all products of European education, imbued with the current ideas of the European intelligentsia. Their plight was not economic nor religious. [...] They were seeking self-determination, identity, liberation within the terms of the post-1789 European culture and their own newly awakened self-consciousness (Avineri 1981, 13).

Zionism held out the hope of rejecting this flawed individual assimilation in favor of a broad collective assimilation, of the “normalization” of the Jewish people. Almost none of these assimilated Jews called into question the idea of assimilation itself, which for them remained an irrefutable sign of progress. In fact, Herzl’s first idea to solve “the Jewish question” had been mass conversion to Christianity (Kornberg 1993, 116). But the reinvigorated anti-Jewish racial sentiment under the then politically correct name “antisemitism” (the League of Antisemites was established in Germany in 1879) would make such a move futile. Zionism was founded on several fundamentally antisemitic ideas, namely that Jews could never integrate in European society and that they constituted, in the language of the time, a different, alien race.

In the European Jewish world of the late nineteenth century, the Zionist movement appeared incongruous and threatening. On the one hand, Zionism claimed to be a modernizing movement that had risen up against Jewish tradition; on the other hand, it idealized the Biblical past, utilized traditional symbols, and aspired to realize by political and military means the millennial messianic dream of the Jews. The Zionists looked with disdain upon all forms of Judaism: “Ben-Gurion saw Judaism as the historical misfortune of the Jewish people

and an obstacle to its transformation into a normal nation.” (Leibowitz 1995, 144) Avineri acknowledges that it would be, to use his own words, “banal, conformist and apologetic” to link Zionism to the traditional religious longing for the Land of Israel (Avineri 1981, 4).

In sum, Zionism emerged as a specifically European political movement in response to Europe’s anti-semitism and under the influence of Christians eager to gather the Hebrews in the Holy Land in order to speed the Second Coming.

3 Adverse reactions to Zionism

The Zionist transformation of the traditionally confessional Jewish identity into a modern nationalist one was no easy task. For Jews integrated into their society in Western and Central Europe and in the United States, the new Zionist identity was threatening and unacceptable. Even in the Russian Empire, where Jews suffered from the systematic discrimination of the tsarist bureaucracy, Zionism was hardly the first choice. Out of the 1.2 million Jews who emigrated from Russia at the turn of the twentieth century, a mere 30,000 made Palestine their destination, and of those, only a quarter remained (www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Immigration/First_Aliyah.html).

But it turned out to be a crucially important minority. Ideologically committed, estranged from, and often adamantly opposed to, Judaic practice, often experienced in political terrorism in Russia, they formed the core of the Zionist settlement in Palestine and became its rulers. Suffice it to mention that the origins of every Prime Minister of Israel can be traced to a small town of Russian Empire. These *shtetl* Jews, largely unfamiliar with urban cosmopolitanism of Europe, developed a national identity that was uniquely suited to Zionism. While the movement itself was inspired by Protestant ideas, it is the ethnic nationalism of the Poles, the Lithuanians or the Ukrainians that provided models for the Zionist pioneers, most of whom hailed from Eastern Europe. The Russian Empire thus became the main source of Zionist pioneers in Palestine at the turn of the twentieth century. Its successor states, particularly the former Soviet Union, would, a century later, supply the Zionist state with over a million of secular nationalist settlers (Shumsky 2002).

The importance that the Zionists accord to the role of the Jewish race, or *Volk* (“people” in German) as the exclusive subject of Jewish history has caused rabbis, both Orthodox and Reform, denounce this cardinal element of Zionist ideology since the end of the nineteenth century. According to Jehiel Jacob Weinberg (1884–1966), a rabbinical authority who developed a synthesis of Lithuanian Judaism and German Orthodoxy:

Jewish nationality is different from that of all nations in the sense that it is uniquely spiritual, and that its spirituality is nothing but the Torah. [...] In this respect we are different from all other nations, and whoever does not recognize it, denies the fundamental principle of Judaism. (Shapiro 1999, 98–99)

Rabbi Weinberg reacted to the concept of secular Jewish nationality, which emerged in the Russian Empire among *shtetl* Jews who had assimilated to Russian culture and abandoned Judaism but, unlike their like in France or Germany, could not move to big cities, change their names, marry non-Jews and stop considering themselves Jews. This concept of Jewish nationality would become official, first in the Soviet Union and later in Israel, which identified citizens as belonging to “the Jewish nationality.” Yet, paradoxically, the only way for a non-Jew to join this ostensibly secular category used by the Israeli state is to undergo religious conversion to Judaism.

Zionism was, at its inception, a marginal movement. Opposition to the Zionist idea was articulated on the spiritual and religious as well as the social and political levels. Most practicing Jews, both Orthodox and Reform, rejected Zionism, referring to it as a project and an ideology that was an overt breakaway from Judaism. Jews who joined various socialist and revolutionary movements, saw Zionism as an attack on equality and as an attempt to distract Jewish masses from pursuing social change. (Prominent British politicians, were also quite cognizant of this potential of Zionism and thus offered it enthusiastic support (Markwick 2018). Finally, those who, thanks to the Emancipation, had integrated into the broader society and become dedicated liberals were convinced that Zionism, because it affirmed that Jews constituted an alien group incapable of integrating into the non-Jewish majority, threatened them no less than antisemitism. Thus, Jewish nationalism was initially rejected by a vast majority of Jews (Rabkin 2006).

Shlomo Sand aptly remarked a curious historical irony:

there were times in Europe when anyone who argued that all Jews belong to a nation of alien origin would have been classified at once as an antisemite. Nowadays, anyone who dares to suggest that the people known in the world as Jews (as distinct from today’s Jewish Israelis) have never been, and are still not, a people or a nation is immediately denounced as a Jew-hater. (Sand 2008, 21)

Judaic opposition to Zionism is far from circumstantial, it is fundamental:

It was the Zionist threat that offered the gravest danger, for it sought to rob the traditional community of its very birthright, both in the Diaspora and in Eretz Israel, the object of its messianic hopes. Zionism challenged all the aspects of traditional Judaism: in its proposal of a modern, national Jewish identity; in the subordination of traditional society to new life-styles; and in its attitude to the religious concepts of Diaspora and redemption. The Zionist threat reached every Jewish community. It was unrelenting and comprehensive, and therefore it met with uncompromising opposition (Salmon 1998, 25).

The most determined resistance to Zionism came from the Hassidim of eastern Hungary and western Galicia. There, any expression of sympathy for Zionism was forbidden. Hungarian Jews, particularly those from the town of Satmar, achieved major stature among the bastions of anti-Zionism. The few Satmar Hasidim who survived World War II settled in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, NY, where they founded a congregation in 1948, with a scant dozen members, and named it Yetev Lev (the name consists of the last words from Ecclesiastes 7:3: “by the sadness of the face *the heart is made good.*”) Several years later, the congregation counted more than one thousand families (Rubin 1972, 40). Later, global in scope, the group established links with other organizations, including the anti-Zionist Neturei Karta, made up principally of the descendants of the Jerusalemites of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, who, in turn, looked to the Satmar Rebbe Yoel Teitelbaum (1887–1979) as their spiritual leader. It was he who, in his fundamental anti-Zionist treatise *Vayoel Moshe*, ruled that Zionism is a heresy, a denial of fundamental messianic belief and a violation of the promise made to God never to take possession of the Holy Land by human effort.

Principled opposition to Zionism was also the hallmark of Rabbi Israel Abuhatsera, better known as Baba Salé, (1890–1983), revered by many Sephardim and quite a few Ashkenazim. When he completed studying *Vayoel Moshe*, he reportedly called the author “a pillar of fire [expression from Exodus 13:21] whose radiance should lead us all to the arrival of the Messiah.” Rabbi Yosef Haim of Baghdad, better known as Ben Ish Hai (1834–1909), an eminent authority in Judaic law, also tried to dampen any form of messianic activism (**Ben Ish Hai 1988,47**).

This shows that while most of the opponents of Zionism were Ashkenazi Jews, the Sephardim also formulated a strong critique of Zionism. The Hakham [used in lieu of Rabbi by Sephardic Jews] Salomon Eliezer Alfandari, “the Holy Grandfather” of Istanbul (c. 1826–1930), was the living embodiment of the Sephardic opposition. He forbade all contact with Zionists and inspired other Jewish scholars to attack them publicly. Haim Shaul Dawik (1861–1932), a Sephardic kabbalist of Jerusalem, considered observant Zionists to be hypocrites capable of leading more Jews into error than could the secular Zionists. This brings to mind a comment by the Ashkenazi authority Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan (1839–1933), better known as Chofetz Chaim, who compared religious Zionists to armed bandits (secular Zionists were, for him, unarmed bandits) (**Rosenberg 1984–1987, 2, 505**). He feared that religious Zionists would be more dangerous than their overtly secular counterparts, whose impious ways repelled many traditional Jews. This school of thought clearly rejects Zionism for intrinsic reasons unrelated to the status of religion in the Zionist enterprise.

The Salonica-born luminary, Hakham Jacob Meir (1856–1939), leader of the Sephardic communities in Palestine, publicly attacked Zionism at a ceremony in honour of the British High Commissioner in 1928. When the master of ceremonies presented Hakham Meir along with dignitaries associated with the Zionist apparatus, the rabbi protested vigorously and declared that he neither recognized nor belonged to the Zionist activists. Moreover, he announced that all pious Jews must separate themselves from it. Along with Rabbi Joseph Haim Sonnenfeld (1848–1932), a prominent leader of pious Palestinian Jews, he drafted a letter to the British mandatory authorities, in which he condemned the Zionists and asked them to free the traditional Jews from Zionist control (Danziger 1983, 450). The League of Nations later authorized the Haredim as people often referred to in the media as “ultra-orthodox.” identify themselves) to remain outside of the increasingly influential Zionist establishment. Their self-isolation (“right of exclusion” in the language of the day) came to a formal end with the declaration of the state of Israel in 1948, even though the anti-Zionists sought to obtain at least equivalent status from the United Nations, successor to the League of Nations.

Accordingly, certain rabbis in Palestine had attempted to conclude separate agreements with Arab leaders during the 1920s and 1930s, and organized demonstrations under the white flag during the fierce battles that raged in Jerusalem following the unilateral declaration of independence by Ben-Gurion. The Zionists of the day denounced their behavior as treachery, calling it a vestige of exile. They were right: the spiritual notion of exile remains central to Judaic sensibilities and tradition.

The Palestine partition plan drawn up by the Peel Commission in 1937 touched off a negative reaction in Morocco, where Jewish and Muslim notables addressed a letter to the Foreign Office in London, in which they warned the British authorities “of disastrous consequences that would result in undesirable troubles between Arab and Jewish elements.” The letter concluded with a call for “an independent Palestinian state to be governed by democratic parliamentary institutions, the only regime that can ensure both groups in Palestine equal rights in the country so dear to them”. (Kenbib 1994, 557)

Reform rabbis also rejected Zionism, emphasized religious identity and deplored its transformation into a national, and even a racial concept. In the 1930s, the Reform movement softened its opposition to the transformation of traditional Jewish identity into a national identity, and adopted an even more conciliatory approach after the Six Day War. Principled anti-Zionism in the ranks of Reform Judaism has survived mainly within the American Council for Judaism, but the synthesis of Reform Judaism and Zionism remains a challenging concept. “Reform Judaism is spiritual, Zionism is political. The outlook of Reform Judaism is the world. The outlook of Zionism is a corner of western Asia [...]” declared Rabbi David Philipson in 1942 (Brownfeld 1997, 9). For Reform Judaism, in other words, Zionism is as much of a departure from tradition as it is for Orthodox Judaism.

The historian and former Israeli ambassador to France, Élie Barnavi, observed: “deprived of its religious dimension, the dream of a ‘Third Kingdom of Israel’ could only lead to totalitarianism” (Barnavi 2000, 225). This may well be true even when a religious movement, National Judaism, or *dati-leumi* in Israeli parlance, integrated this dream in their ideology.

National Judaism used to be a low-key moderate variety of Orthodoxy. The movement originated in Russia in early twentieth century. It accepted Zionism and was initially focused on the interests and needs of religious Jews in Palestine, where it developed a system of religious schools, combining ritual observance with Zionist values. It changed radically under the impact of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (1891–1982). He developed mystical and poetical ideas of his father, Rabbi Avraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), one of the rare rabbis of the day to encourage the Zionists, into an effective doctrine capable of mobilizing masses for war and settlement starting in the late 1960s. (Militant Islamism would arise only two decades later.) As the secular left has lost much of its pioneering spirit, followers of National Judaism, for whom possession of the Land of Israel occupies the centre of their worldview, have now become the most devoted Zionists.

Though it may seem surprising today, Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines (1839–1915), founder of what would become National Judaism, inveighed against confusing settlement with messianic expectations. Well aware of the rabbinical consensus that rejected the very idea of Zionism as heretical and dangerous, he affirmed that: “Zionist ideology is devoid of any trace of the idea of redemption.... In none of the Zionists’ acts or aspirations is there the slightest allusion to future redemption” (Ravitzky 1996, 34).

A crucial element of Zionism, the use of force, causes Jews a gamut of reactions, from boundless pride, to embarrassment and even revulsion. The Pentateuch and several of the books of the Prophets, such as Joshua and Judges, when read literally, teem with violent images. Biblical Israel was conquered under conditions that could hardly be described as peaceful. But far from glorifying war, Jewish tradition identifies allegiance to God, and not military prowess, as the principal reason for the victories mentioned in the Bible. Conversely, “God did not send us into exile because we did not have an army, but because we had sinned.” (Blau 1978, 249) Tradition locates Jewish heroism in the study halls rather than on the battlefields.

The Israeli sensibility is quite different. According to the Israeli general Moshe Dayan (1915-1981):

Death in combat is not the end of the fight but its peak. And since combat is a part and at times the sum total of life, death, which is the peak of combat, is not the destruction of life but its fullest, most powerful expression. (Shatz 2004, 26)

It was National Judaism, for whose followers the proudly irreligious general was a hero, that became instrumental in providing Judaic legitimacy to the use of force. Since the 1967 War, nationalist rabbis pointed up the need to occupy and settle the land. They had intrepidly trespassed “the four cubits of halakha,” the traditional realm of Judaic adjudication. For them, “earthly military exploits are raised to a metaphysical plane and take on a universal, messianic meaning and validity. Note that in this instance religion is not lending its sanction to a conservative social structure but to an innovative one (i. e., Jewish political sovereignty), a structure that represents revolutionary change in the life of the people” (Ravitzky 1996, 85). National Judaism grafted messianic motifs onto a strong commitment to the military, and is now firmly implanted in the armed forces, is at the forefront of the settlement enterprise, and a new generation of leaders grew in its ranks who embrace unabashedly exclusive nationalism, anti-Palestinian measures and approve wholesale expulsion of African refugees. The Zionist state has been endowed with Judaic legitimacy, nay holiness, within the framework of National Judaism, which becomes, in fact, the state religion.

Moreover, National Judaism glorifies concepts quite foreign to Jewish tradition, such as “national honor” and “national pride.” Yitzchak Blau, a rabbi who used to teach at a Zionist yeshiva in the territories Israel occupied in 1967, demonstrated how Judaic sources were systematically reinterpreted to derive from them warlike teachings. This is how many rabbis came to use the Torah to denigrate the value of compassion, to promote racism and to transform the occupation into the supreme good. He attributed this ideological conversion to the influence of secular fascist-minded intellectuals like Uri Zvi Greenberg (1896–1981), who dismissed Judaic pacifism and rejected the entire rabbinical tradition. “It would be quite an irony,” concedes the rabbi and a former settler, “to discover that a virulent critic of Judaism, Friedrich Nietzsche, indirectly influenced the religious Jewish community.” (Blau 2000, 57).

Distinctions between the spiritual and the military become blurred, and as Ravitzky put it, “the Army of Israel, which is the army of the Lord, is called out of Zion to establish a *pax judaica* in the Middle East and ultimately in the world as a whole, in preparation for the fulfilment of the vision of the End of Days” (Ravitzky 1996, 84). While only a minority of Jewish Zionists would accept this eschatological vision, it appeals to millions of Christian Zionists, as if emphasizing the continuing relevance of the Protestant origins of Zionism.

In the course of the Israeli operation against Gaza in 2009–2010, the press revealed the use made by the military rabbinate to mobilise Judaic texts to lend weight to calls for merciless repression of the Palestinian population (Harel 2009). A year later, a rabbi from a West Bank settlement affirmed in a book entitled *Torat hamelekh* (The King’s Torah) that the prohibition “Thou shalt not kill” (just as “You shall love your neighbour”) applies only to Jews. The 230-page volume consists of commentaries on the conduct of war and promotes acts that the Israeli press described as terrorist in nature. For example, it is permitted, and even obligatory, to kill all those—Jews or non-Jews—who oppose Israeli military operations. By identifying modern Israel with Israel in the Bible, the book advocated the murder to children “who will grow up to hurt us.” (Estrin 2010)

These calls for murder by rabbis affiliated with National Judaism did not cost them their positions as state-salaried rabbis. The counterpart of National Judaism in the United States, Modern Orthodoxy, particularly the Rabbinical Council of America, echoed the same line of argument, insisting that it was “incorrect to risk the lives of our soldiers in order to minimize civilian deaths on the other side.” (Wagner 2006) Unmediated by the largely pacifist tradition, the direct link established by followers of National Judaism between the biblical texts and the challenges facing Israel today tends to encourage violence.

In the twenty-first century, violence stopped being the exclusive realm of the military. Graduates of institutions affiliated with National Judaism committed well-known acts of political violence: the mass massacre in the Hebron mosque in 1994, the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin in 1995 as well as earlier albeit less known terrorist attacks on Muslim schools and Palestinian town mayors (Peleg 1997).

For Haredi opponents of National Judaism, this movement is committing a particularly grievous transgression: the profanation of the divine name. For anyone who sees televised images of ostensibly pious Jews abusing foreign journalists and Arab civilians can only conclude that Judaism inspires such cruelty. Moreover, the recourse to the Judaic concept of providence in order to justify Israeli military and political actions is no less cause for concern:

The notion that we can do whatever we please, succumb to any kind of temptation, or engage in any form of foolish self-aggrandizement without fear of penalty because we have an inside track to the Almighty is the plain opposite of religious faith. ... Such blind faith is not really a faith in God at all, but rather faith in ourselves. It makes a tool out of the Almighty. It turns him into a kind of “secret weapon” whose purpose is to guarantee our success at whatever we fancy. It is an idolatrous concept that masks what is actually an irrational belief in our own invincibility. (Sober 1990, 30–31)

The Zionist mobilization of youth contrasted with the pacifist self-image of the Jews, practicing or not, and quite naturally led to fundamental criticism. Albert Einstein, along with other Jewish intellectuals, in 1935 denounced the Betar youth movement founded by Jabotinsky, calling it “as much of a danger to our youth as Hitlerism is to German youth” (Jerome 2009). Einstein, who was close to cultural and humanist Zionism, was openly opposed to the establishment of a Zionist state in Palestine and repeatedly criticized the rightward drift of the Zionist movement in the 1940s. Irving Reichert (1895–1968), a Reform rabbi, pointed to a dangerous “parallel between the insistence of some Zionist spokesmen upon nationality and race and blood, and similar pronouncements by fascist leaders in certain European dictatorships” (Ross 2011, 37). Such parallels can be found in a memoir of life in a Lithuanian town between the two wars: “In Biliunas Street, a member of the Young Lithuania movement wearing a green uniform met a member of Betar, in gray-brown; they greeted each other raising their arms in the fascist salute” (Vanagas 1995, 69–70). Nowadays, Israel’s public figures often invoke the danger of fascism (Bernard 2017), while the current Minister of Culture once claimed in a TV interview that she was “happy to be a fascist” (Schechter 2015). Not surprisingly, this continuing trend has attracted much criticism and sharpened opposition to Israel as a Zionist state.

It may be argued that this critique of Zionism is more political than Judaic. To the extent that rabbinic Judaism had shaped the worldview of the Jews for nearly two millennia, the widely spread aversion to violence and oppression should be ultimately traced to Judaic moral values as well as to the minority experience that moulded this group.

4 Rejection and accommodation

Political critique of the right-wing tendencies in Israel’s non-Arab society naturally follows current events. However, theological arguments put forth by the detractors of Zionism have hardly changed since their initial

polemics at the end of the nineteenth century. Even though Jewish life has since undergone radical transformations and major tragedies, Haredi anti-Zionists have integrated those events into the traditional schema of interpretation, barely modifying the way they express their views. It is on the issue of pro-active messianism, the very idea that leaders of National Judaism hold dearest, that the anti-Zionists base their strongest rejection of Zionism and of the State of Israel, which for them has been “conceived in sin.” For these critics the problem is not simply that the state is illegitimate and that it may be placing millions of Jews, both in Israel and throughout the world, in jeopardy — but that it has also become an obstacle on the path to the final redemption of humanity (Teitelbaum 1985, 8).

At the same time, refusal to ascribe any Judaic value to the State of Israel made it possible for many Haredim to deal with it as they would have with any other state. The need to placate the staunch anti-Zionists at the time of declaring the Zionist state led to a series of agreements (so called “status quo agreements”) that ensured a degree of respect for Judaic law in state institutions, left the issues of marriage, divorce and burial in the hands of the Orthodox establishment and even inserted a veiled reference to God (“the Rock of Israel”) in the Declaration of Independence (Friedman 2017).

These pragmatic anti-Zionists justified their participation in government, while doing so in terms appropriate to exile. The Jews had always sent their representatives to political leaders in order to protect the interests of the community. Likewise, the Haredim reasoned, they could dispatch delegates to the Israeli government in order to defend the interests of pious Jews on a wide range of issues. The positions taken by Rabbi Eliezer Menahem Schach (1898–2001), a respected Haredi leader, to a great extent determined Haredi attitudes toward the Zionist State. He did not approve the colonization of the Palestinian territories occupied in 1967, terming it a flagrant provocation “against the nations.” While a firm opponent of Zionism, he remained open to pragmatic and limited collaboration with successive Israeli governments. Rabbi Schach’s positions were a mix of ideological intransigence and circumspect pragmatism. On the ideological level, he stood for uncompromising opposition to the State of Israel, which he termed “a revolt against the kingdom of God.” (Friedman 1989) While taking care not to lend legitimacy to the official institutions of the state, on the practical level, he focused on an overarching goal: to safeguard the Jews through the survival of its Orthodox minority.

As a result of Rabbi Schach’s pragmatism, the Orthodox parties increased their participation in political affairs during the years that he was their leader. His was an approach that could be traced to a rabbinical dispensation for Jews to participate in the Zionist political system while denying its legitimacy: “If a highwayman falls upon me in a forest and threatens me with arms, and I begin a discussion with him, so that he spare my life, does that mean that I recognize his legitimacy? No; for me, he remains a highwayman.” (Ben-Hayim 2004) Several Haredi groups, hailing from varying geographic, ideological and cultural origins, both in and outside of Israel, share this pragmatic approach. At the same time, there also exists a principled minority that refuses to take any support from the Zionist state and, of course, to participate in its administration.

But what exactly do these fervent anti-Zionist activists propose while the powerful Zionist state has just celebrated its 70th anniversary? Is there a point in locking the stable door when the horse has bolted? Without attributing the slightest value to the perpetuation of the Zionist character (which Zionists call “Jewish character”) of the state, the anti-Zionists put forward reconciliation strategies that range from recognition and reparation of the injustices committed against the Palestinians to the search for cordial coexistence in the Holy Land (Leifer 2018). Though neither unified nor of one voice, the adversaries of Zionism invite the Jews to find the courage to break the cycle of violence that these Judaic scholars attribute to Zionism.

Anti-Zionist literature regularly evokes the apocalyptic danger that the State of Israel represents for the whole world (Blau 1978, 279–280). The destruction of several Arab states by Israel’s indefectible ally the United States and the presence of Israel’s nuclear arsenal, reinforce their premonitions of doom while rejoice most Zionists. Some Haredi rabbis are keenly aware of the Israeli threat to the entire world, which only confirms their conviction that the creation of Israel—for them, an arrogant revolt against God—will ultimately lead to a catastrophe of worldwide and cataclysmic proportions. Their vision is reflected in the perception of the State of Israel as a danger to the entire world, revealed in public opinion polls carried out in several countries (BBC 2013).

Anti-Zionists’ overtures to the Arabs and their continuing insistence on compromise and negotiation have won them the scorn of the Zionists, who feel nothing but disdain for “this tradition of the weak” and insist on the values of courage and pride. But for the critics of Zionism, such values not only contradict traditional Jewish sensibility, but represent a danger for the Jewish people as well. They remind us that the Jews constitute a truly minuscule group when measured against the whole of humanity: 0.2% of the world’s population (approximately 14 million against a total of seven billion). The time has come, the anti-Zionists warn, to abandon delusions of grandeur and omnipotence.

The traditional Judaic view of the State of Israel was summarized by a Haredi parliamentarian during a debate on a possible withdrawal of Israeli forces from Hebron: “The Zionists are wrong. There is no need to foster love of the Land of Israel by the political and military rule in the entire land. One can love Hebron even

from Tel Aviv...even if it is under Palestinian rule. The state of Israel is not a value. Only matters of spirituality belong to the family of 'values'." (Segev 2005)

In the seven decades since 1948 neither Judaism, nor Zionism or Israel has stood still. One factor was the massive arrival of non-Ashkenazi Jews from Arab and Muslim countries. Unfamiliar with ideological fragmentation typical among European Jews, they projected their strong sense of communal solidarity onto the Zionist state. This happened in spite of the fact that the structure and the origins of the state reflect cultural values of East European *shtetls*. Jews of Muslim lands constituted only 0.37% of the membership of the World Zionist Federation in the 1930s. Yet they have since by and large given legitimacy to the Zionist state, even though some of their scholars took a variety of anti-Zionist positions. This split between the leadership and the rank and file took a stark expression in the entry of Shas, the major Arab Jewish party founded by the staunchly Zionist Rabbi Schach, into the World Zionist Federation. This happened, of course, long after his death.

Haredi Judaism, whatever its claims to immutability, has also undergone changes. While there is widespread reluctance to join the army, several segregated military units have been organized to accommodate the few who make this step. It is certainly a sign of the growing "Zionization" of the Haredim that in 2017 2680 of them enrolled in the army, which, in turn, accommodates them by establishing separate Haredi units (Gross 2017). Haredi Jews have served as ministers, and a degree of rapprochement with the Israeli mainstream can be observed, particularly as far as treatment of Palestinians is concerned. A strong anti-gentile sentiment shown in Haredi public opinion surveys acts as a catalyst of this rapprochement with the Israeli mainstream. Thus the majority of Haredi Jews have extended a de facto recognition to the Zionist state, even though theologically they remain non- and anti-Zionists.

Those who continue to articulate traditional anti-Zionist ideas and regularly demonstrate against military draft and the arrests of Haredi draft-dodgers (TOI Staff 2017), deplore this loss of ideological purity but attribute it to purely material considerations. They argue that this embrace of the Zionist state would last only so long as the state subsidises Haredi institutions and their students. This may well be true since principled Haredi opponents of the Zionist state not only appear committed as ever but have begun cooperating with conscientious objectors from avowedly secular backgrounds (Glazer 2018). This cooperation creates a novel challenge since it shows that the anti-Zionist commitment succeeds in bridging the proverbially unbridgeable religious-secular divide in Israeli society.

The gradual integration of Zionist ideas and modes of behaviour into traditional Judaism has produced something new. According to a veteran Israeli journalist:

We are Israeli first and only slightly Jewish. Our Israeliness is arrogant, impatient and violent. ... Our Judaism is not that of pre-Holocaust Europe or pre-state North Africa. As Jews we wrote, studied and taught; as Israelis we conquered, expelled and abused. I'm proud of Judaism and ashamed of Israeliness. ... Why are we like this? This is what we learned from the Holocaust. Our Holocaust lesson is that cruelty pays off and that racism is rewarded. That's the lesson of our fake Judaism. ... It's not Jews who expel, oppress and abuse, it's Israelis. Judaism is not to blame, Israeli Judaism is. We are the Israelis, and this is our Judaism. (Klein 2018)

This kind of Judaism repels many Jews in Israel and, particularly, in other countries. It turns off younger Jews in North America from interest in, let alone support for, Israel. Moreover, to them, the very idea of a Jewish state appears as something anachronistic and alien to their Judaism (Waxman 2017).

However, the policy of centrality of Israel exported around the world by Israeli educators for several decades has borne fruit. Many Jews find it difficult to separate Zionism from the Jewish identity as it has been taught to them. Their identity is often centred on political support for the State of Israel, and they see advocacy for Israel — a special course in the curriculum of many private Jewish schools — as a key part of being Jewish.

In many non-Haredi synagogues, support for Israel has entered liturgy. The congregants' enthusiasm is palpable when they chant the blessing for the state of Israel and its armed forces, enthusiasm that seems missing in the traditionally central parts of the communal service such as the silent *amida* prayer. Many Jews have simply not noticed that their traditional religious and ethnic identity has morphed into a new political one. They support Israel financially, attend concerts by Israeli singers, and some even encourage their children to serve in the Israeli army. The existence of a state boasting a national flag, a powerful army, and a prosperous economy confers pride and a sense of involvement in something bigger than private life. For them legitimacy of Israel is taken for granted.

5 Conclusion

In terms of traditional Judaic scholarship, espoused by most Haredim, Zionism and the state that embodies it are at best irrelevant to their Judaism. Yet, more modernized Jewish communities embrace the centrality of Israel

with a lot of emotion. Most followers of Modern Orthodoxy, liberal in many other respects, enthusiastically support military actions of Israel cannot imagine a Judaism without the Zionist state. In their often romantic view of Israel they cannot understand how a pious Jew can live in Jerusalem and remain intransigent in his rejection of Zionism.

With respect to Haredi anti-Zionism, many wonder why these anti-Zionists continue to live in a state that they abhor so much. One of them answered: “We were here under the Ottomans, we were here under the British, and we shall be here after the Zionists” (Interview with Rabbi Moshe Hirsch 2003). For them, not only Judaism but the Land of Israel exist separately from the state of Israel. While Israel’s legitimacy in terms of Haredi *daat torah* continues to be at best problematic, it has little effect on the new Judaism espoused by millions of Zionists in and outside Israel.

Challenges to Zionism used to come from both Orthodox and Reform streams of Judaism. The opposition of the Reform movement largely declined in the wake of the 1967 war but seems to come back, spurred by indignation at the oppression of the Palestinians and, more recently, at the continuing religious discrimination of Reform Jews in Israel. The ongoing Judaic estrangement of Reform Jews from the Zionist state parallels the more general disaffection from the very idea of a Jewish state expressed by young Jews in North America.

At the same time, the country’s leaders and their supporters elsewhere have made strenuous efforts in the international arena to conflate Zionism and Judaism, mainly in order to present all critique of Zionism and of the Zionist state as antisemitic. These efforts have borne fruit and explain, at least partly, the impunity that Israel enjoys in its lethal repression of the Palestinian resistance, including unarmed demonstrators, as was in evidence in May 2018 (Buttu 2018; Landau 2018).

It would seem misleading to interpret policies of the state of Israel through the prism of Judaism or the so-called Jewish values. In fact, the Zionist state can be better understood as a country in West Asia with its own history and interests. However, since Israeli leaders nowadays insist on “the Jewish character” of the Zionist state is, one must recognize that it faces multiple Judaic challenges coming from both Orthodox and more liberal streams of this ancient religion. This may explain why Israel prefers to rely on the truly religious support of the Evangelicals rather than on the uncertain and considerably less massive Jewish support.

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