

RABBI ZEV'S REFLECTIONS

What really is Zionism? And why is it important to us?



In our community, the word Zionism can stir strong feelings, deep pride, hard questions, and sometimes confusion. At its heart, Zionism is the movement for Jewish national sovereignty in the historic

Land of Israel. As a modern political movement, it emerged in late nineteenth-century Europe, but its roots are far older and deeply woven into who we are as a people. For centuries, Jewish prayer, scripture, ritual, and memory have preserved our connection to Zion, Jerusalem, and the Land of Israel as both our spiritual center and our ancestral home. Modern Zionism took shape when that enduring attachment met the realities of modern nationalism, antisemitism, and the longing for Jewish safety, dignity, and renewal.

“Zion” originally refers to a hill in Jerusalem, but in Jewish tradition it came to signify Jerusalem more broadly and, by extension, the Land of Israel itself. That connection is not only historical; it lives in the rhythm of Jewish life. Our biblical narratives are rooted in that land, in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and in Jerusalem as the site of the Temple. Even after exile and dispersion, we continued to carry that longing in our prayers, in our blessings after meals, in the Passover declaration “Next year in Jerusalem,” and in the fast days that mourn the destruction of the Temple. In that sense, Zionism was not created out of nowhere. It is a modern expression of an ancient bond between the Jewish people, our faith, and our historic homeland.

Modern Zionism came about in the late nineteenth century in eastern and central Europe, when Jewish communities were under enormous pressure. Some Jews sought integration into European society, while others faced rising antisemitism and exclusion, especially in

the Russian Empire. Early groups such as Hovevei Zion encouraged Jewish agricultural settlement in Ottoman Palestine. The movement gained political form through Theodor Herzl, whose 1896 pamphlet *The Jewish State* argued that antisemitism was not a temporary problem that assimilation could solve, but a structural danger that required a national response. When Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress in 1897, it gave political shape to something many Jews already felt in their bones: that our future could not depend only on the goodwill of others, and that Jewish self-determination mattered.

From the beginning, Zionism was never just one idea. It included political Zionists focused on diplomacy and statehood, cultural Zionists committed to Hebrew language and Jewish renewal, religious Zionists who understood return to the land through a theological lens, and labor Zionists who emphasized agriculture, work, and collective life. That diversity matters because it reminds us that Zionism has always been part of a larger Jewish conversation, shaped by different experiences, hopes, and visions of what Jewish life could become.

For many of us, Zionism matters because it speaks to our peoplehood, our continuity, and our responsibility to one another. It reminds us that Jews are not only a religious community, but also a people with a shared history, shared memory, and a connection to a specific land. In the modern era, after centuries of insecurity and persecution, Zionism came to represent the conviction that Jewish safety and dignity require a place where we can exercise self-determination and help shape our own collective future. For many, its significance is also cultural and spiritual: the revival of Hebrew as a living language, the rebuilding of Jewish public life, and the ability to shape holidays, education, and civic rhythms around Jewish time and memory.

At the same time, Jewish views on Zionism are not uniform, and acknowledging that honestly is part of what it means to be a healthy community. Some of us understand Zionism primarily in religious terms, some in national or cultural terms, and some are deeply critical of aspects of Zionist history or contemporary Israeli policy while still affirming the importance of Jewish

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homeland and self-determination. Others reject Zionism altogether. A thoughtful Jewish conversation makes room for complexity, even when the subject is emotional, and recognizes both the central importance Zionism holds for many Jews and the diversity of views within our own people.

Today, Zionism is discussed in a wider and more challenging context than in earlier generations. For many Jews, it still means support for Jewish self-determination and the continued existence of Israel as a Jewish homeland. For others, especially among younger or more politically diverse Jews, the term carries different meanings depending on whether it is understood as national self-determination, a particular political program, or a framework tied to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some Jews identify strongly as Zionist while also sharply criticizing Israeli governments, settlement policy, or the treatment of Palestinians. Others describe themselves as non-Zionist or anti-Zionist for religious, ethical, or political reasons. This diversity of opinion reminds us that there is no single Jewish voice, and that our conversations about Zionism today are often intertwined with larger questions of justice, security, diaspora identity, and the future of Israel and Palestine.

One of the hardest questions we face today is whether anti-Zionism is the same as being anti-Israel or antisemitic. The answer depends on what exactly is being rejected and how that rejection is expressed. Criticism of Israeli policy, leaders, or military actions is not in itself antisemitic, and many Jews, Israelis, and supporters of Israel engage in that kind of criticism out of moral concern and communal responsibility. At the same time, many Jewish organizations and scholars argue that anti-Zionism becomes antisemitic when it denies the Jewish people alone the right to self-determination, erases the historic Jewish connection to the land, uses classic anti-Jewish stereotypes, or treats "Zionist" as a code word for Jews in general. Others argue that anti-Zionism can be a political position, including among some Jews, that opposes nationalism or objects to the way Zionism has been realized historically. This is one of the reasons the issue remains so deeply debated. As a community, we need to approach these conversations

with clarity, honesty, and care, distinguishing between legitimate criticism and language that demonizes Jews, rejects Jewish peoplehood, or calls for the destruction of Israel.

The roots of Zionism lie in both ancient Jewish memory and modern political reality. It grew out of centuries of attachment to Zion and the Land of Israel, and it took organized political shape in response to the conditions of modern Europe. Its importance in Jewish life comes from the way it connects our history, our faith, our security, our identity, and our hope for renewal. Whether we approach it as a religious idea, a political movement, or a cultural project, Zionism remains one of the most significant forces in modern Jewish history. And for many of us, it remains part of the ongoing story of who we are, what we remember, and what we hope to build together as a people.

Food for thought...

L'Shalom

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