

Anti-Zionism in Early American Reform Judaism

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At a very young age, I realized that my maternal grandfather was an important man. People that I didn't know would come up to me and tell me what a great man he was. Often, these folks were older people with accents. Later, I learned that they were survivors of the Holocaust. My grandfather, a banker, had given them loans to start businesses, providing them with a fresh start in their new lives. Often, these Holocaust survivors were turned down by the bank's loan committee, but my grandfather would lend to them from his own pocket. He was a trusting soul, and both his faith and his loans were consistently repaid.

As a small child, I was struck by the fact that everybody seemed to know my grandfather. In addition to being a banker and a generous individual, he had served as President of the Temple, the Jewish Federation and the United Way. He was a distinguished community leader. Only later did I learn about one of his first leadership endeavors, one that did not make me so proud.

Back in 1943, two decades before my birth, my grandfather had been a member of the Basic Principles Committee of Congregation Beth Israel. This Committee was formed in the wake of a congregational uproar, following the Temple's election of a new Senior Rabbi. This new Rabbi was an anti-Zionist, vocally opposed to the establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine. Opponents of his selection were loyal to the congregation's Assistant Rabbi, who was passed over for the senior post, largely because he was more sympathetic to Zionism.

In the midst of the controversy, Temple leaders decided that they needed to clarify the congregation's stance. A committee was appointed, and the Basic Principles of Congregation Beth Israel were adopted. The very first plank was strong opposition to Zionism: "We neither hope nor pray for the establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine." About one-third of the congregation resigned, establishing a new synagogue home. My own heritage is split, since my father's parents and grandparents were among those who left Beth Israel to found the new congregation.

By the time I learned about the Basic Principles, my maternal grandfather had died. When I found out that he had been on the Committee that had adopted the Principles, I was shocked. During my childhood, my grandfather had been a staunch supporter of Israel. In fact, after his death, he was honored at a

testimonial dinner by State of Israel Bonds. I could not imagine how American Jews could oppose Zionism, at the same time that their brothers and sisters were being slaughtered in Nazi Concentration Camps.

Congregation Beth Israel in Houston was not alone. Though the Reform Movement had officially embraced Zionism by 1937, Reform Judaism had a long history of opposing the establishment of a Jewish State. Anti-Zionists had established the American Council for Judaism. This group proudly proclaimed Judaism as their religion, but America as their nation, their home, and the source of their culture. Members of the American Council for Judaism, including some leaders of our own Congregation B'nai Israel, thought that the establishment of a Jewish State would subject them to charges of dual loyalty. They wanted the world to know that they would never serve any nation but the United States of America.

To understand this anti-Zionist position, we must acknowledge that Jewish life in early 20th Century America was very different from our own situation in 2015. A virulently anti-Semitic Catholic Priest broadcast his hateful message on a popular radio program. The leaders of Congregation Beth Israel in Houston, successful businessmen and professionals, were not permitted to join the same firms or the same clubs as their non-Jewish colleagues. Anti-Semitism was neither unusual nor socially unacceptable. Fears that a Jewish State might lead to increased anti-Semitic sentiment were not entirely unfounded.

And yet, from the earliest days of Reform Judaism, back in the 19th Century, long before the Holocaust, anti-Zionism stemmed from an ideology that we may actually consider praiseworthy. The founders of Reform Judaism dreamed of a beautiful and all-encompassing redemption. For them, the mission of the Jewish people was to serve as God's partners in *tikkun olam*, repairing a broken and troubled world, for all humanity. They were turned off by a narrow Messianic vision, focused on the Jewish people's return to its homeland. Instead, they worked for the betterment of all humanity. In their minds, the Jewish people could best do God's work by remaining dispersed throughout the world, laboring alongside men and women of every race and religion to make the entire Earth a better place.

Early Reform Rabbis explained their Messianic hopes, along with their anti-Zionism, in the Pittsburgh Platform, adopted in 1875. Here are their words: "We recognize in the modern era. . . the approach of the realization of Israel's great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice and peace

among all [humanity]. 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.”

As you just heard, our optimistic Reform founders truly believed that the Messianic Age was fast approaching. And why shouldn't they? In just a century, Jews had gone from being pariahs throughout Europe, never considered to be citizens in any land, to feeling like full partners in the modern development of the western world. In the minds of the Reform Rabbis of 1875, Jews could never be better off in a land of their own.

By 1937, Reform Judaism's optimism had dimmed. Yes, the Rabbis still believed in the goodness of America, but they were no longer sure that ultimate redemption was at hand. Even more, they had begun to realize that, for some Jews, particularly in Europe, the Messianic Age was very far away. And so, in the Columbus Platform of Reform Judaism, our Rabbis changed their position. They wrote: “In the rehabilitation of Palestine, the land hallowed by memories and hopes, we behold the promise of renewed life for many of our brethren. 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 of refuge for the oppressed but also a center of Jewish culture and spiritual life.”

More recently, Reform Judaism's enthusiasm for Israel has grown. No longer do we harbor any significant anti-Zionist element. Our Reform movement sponsors the largest annual summer program to bring North American Jewish teenagers to Israel, with many of our own Temple young people visiting Israel with NFTY or on Birthright. The most recent platform of Reform Judaism, adopted in 1999, even suggests that we should encourage *aliyah*, moving to Israel, as the ultimate personal fulfillment of Zionism. Reform Jews are among the most generous donors to Israel. Our Temple and its members are investors in Israel Bonds.

In fact, few among us can even remember a time when Reform Judaism wasn't enthusiastically pro-Israel. My maternal grandparents, anti-Zionist as they were, accepted Israel's existence and knew that they had to support it, from the day that independence was declared in 1948. For others, endorsement of the Jewish State came more slowly. Congregation Beth Israel did not officially repeal its anti-Zionist Basic Principles until the late 1960s, with the pro-Israel sentiment that swept America in the wake of the Six Day War.

These days, support for Israel has become more complicated for some American Jews. Many of us are dismayed by the deterioration of the peace process. We often disagree with Israeli government policies toward the Palestinian people. We are repulsed by the ultra-Orthodox religious establishment in Israel, which denies basic religious freedoms to Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Jews.

I have even heard some American Jews questioning Zionism altogether. Looking forward to a Messianic redemption that includes all humanity, they ask whether a separate Jewish state is step backward. Hoping for universal salvation, they challenge the legitimacy of a nation specifically dedicated to the liberation of one particular people.

But let there be no mistake: Even as we pray for the repair of the whole Earth, we must still be concerned for the welfare of our Jewish people. Even when the State of Israel does not live up to its greatest promise, the Jewish State is fully legitimate. Israel is our Jewish homeland. Israel is vital to the survival of the Jewish people.

For the Jewish people, return to the Land of Israel has been a first step toward ultimate redemption. Out of the ashes of the Holocaust, Jewish men and women have brought flowers to the desert, fulfilling the dream of saving the imperiled, renewing Jewish culture, and deepening our spiritual life.

Finally, though, we acknowledge that redemption is incomplete. Salvation for the Jewish people is a blessing, but it is not enough. In 1937, in the same document that first proclaimed the pro-Zionist sympathies of Reform Judaism, our Rabbis penned this declaration. Tonight, these words remain our prayer:

“Judaism seeks the attainment of a just society by the application of its teachings to the economic order, to industry and commerce, and to national and international affairs. It aims at the elimination of . . . misery and suffering, of poverty and degradation, of tyranny and slavery, of social inequality and prejudice, of ill-will and strife. It advocates the promotion of harmonious relations . . . on the basis of equity and justice. . . . It pleads for the safe-guarding of childhood against all exploitation. It champions the cause of all who work and of their right to an adequate standard of living. . . . Judaism emphasizes the duty of charity, and strives for a social order which will protect [all people] against the material disabilities of old age, sickness and unemployment.”

Let this be God's will, and our mission, for Israel, the United States, and all the world.

Amen.