

Anti-Zionism and the Pluralist's Dilemma

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This week's parashah, Shoftim, contains the oft-quoted statement, "Tzedek, tzedek tirdof—justice, justice you shall pursue." (Deut. 16:20)

Many scholars have wondered why the word "tzedek" is doubled. Rabbi Moses Nachmanides (also known as Ramban) suggests the statement should be read to mean, "you shall pursue justice justly." In other words, the commandment is not only to reach just outcomes; the way in which we pursue justice also matters.

While this verse is most closely connected to jurisprudence, we can also generalize the principle to mean: "Do the right thing in the right way."

I have often said that pluralism is a core value for me and for Reform Judaism. Pluralism holds that there are many different and legitimate ways to think about the world, and that we can learn from different perspectives even when we disagree with them.

I try to be intentional about nurturing pluralism in our congregation and encouraging curiosity about how others see things. But some congregants recently challenged me on that.

When I told them that our upcoming Let's Talk About Israel series is a good example of pluralism at TBE, they asked me if any of the speakers we're bringing in are anti-Zionist.

"No," I said. "Our speakers represent a range of perspectives on Israel, but all of them identify as Zionists."

To which they responded: "How can you claim to be a pluralist if you don't invite the anti-Zionist perspective to the table?" It's a reasonable question, and it makes me think: What are the limits of our pluralism?

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To help us answer that, let's start by defining Zionism.

The First Zionist Congress, which met at Basle, Switzerland, in 1897, declared, "The aim of Zionism is to create for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law."¹

Rabbis Meir and Tara Feldman, the anchors of our Let's Talk About Israel series, define Zionism as "the Jewish people's right to exist as a sovereign nation in their ancestral homeland."

To be a Zionist, then, is to believe in these things.

I am a Zionist. That doesn't mean I support every policy or action of the Israeli government, but it does mean that I believe the sovereign State of Israel has an unconditional right to exist as a Jewish state in the Land of Israel.

Anti-Zionism rejects that premise.

There are various forms of anti-Zionism. One is religious anti-Zionism, which is espoused most coherently by the Satmar Hasidic sect.

The Satmar rebbe Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum taught that Zionism is a poisonous ideology that defies God's will by establishing Jewish sovereignty in Eretz Yisrael before the coming of the Messiah. Satmar schools teach children that Zionism is one of the most dangerous threats to the existence and well-being of the Jewish people.

On the other end of the spectrum, there is secular anti-Zionism. This is not a Jewish view per se, though many Jews do espouse it.

Secular anti-Zionism holds that the State of Israel is an illegitimate colonial enterprise that stole land rightfully belonging to the Arabs who were living there immediately prior to the 19th-century Zionist pioneer movement.

Other anti-Zionists reject the idea of Jews as a "nation," thinking of us, rather, as a religion only. Believe it or not, this was actually the view of Classical American Reform Judaism in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

In those days, Reform Judaism openly identified as an anti-Zionist movement. In my hometown of Houston, the largest Reform congregation in the early 1940s required all new members to sign an anti-Zionist pledge as a condition of membership.

Today, this kind of anti-Zionism more commonly takes the form of anti-nationalism, the worldview famously expressed by John Lennon, who invited us to imagine a world with no countries, "all the people / sharing all the world."

Nationalism, by definition, says that there are some people who belong and some who don't. Anti-nationalist anti-Zionists reject the State of Israel on the grounds that it excludes millions of Arabs in order to ensure a majority-Jewish citizenry.

There are surely additional arguments anti-Zionists would make, too.

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So, to go back to the issue raised in our parashah: By not inviting anti-Zionist speakers to share their views at TBE, am I doing pluralism in the wrong way?

After all, not all anti-Zionists are pro-Hamas demonstrators who chant “gas the Jews.” Some are well-mannered Jewish adults who went to Sunday school and Jewish summer camp and believe the values they learned there compel them to be anti-Zionist. Some of them were raised and educated here at Temple Beth-El.

Does pluralism demand that their views be represented among the speakers we invite to teach us about Israel?

I’m calling this “the pluralist’s dilemma,” and I am going to ask you to help resolve it: I’d like you to tell me if you want to hear from an anti-Zionist speaker at our temple, or if that would be beyond the pale.

I invite responses from all TBE members, whether you’re here in the chapel tonight or not.

I want to pursue pluralism in the right way, with integrity, and I am very interested in what you have to say.