

Israel Lovers

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

Parashat B'midbar 5786 / May 15, 2026

On Wednesday, amidst the fallout from *The New York Times* piece alleging sexual abuse in Israeli prisons, an ad popped up on my Facebook feed—a congressional candidate in Westchester County asking for money.

It said: “Pitch in NOW to Help Effie Fire Israel Lover Mike Lawler.”

It’s the first time I’ve ever seen the phrase “Israel Lover” used as a pejorative.

The candidate probably didn’t realize it, but that term has an important place in the history of Zionism.

Chovevei Tzion—“Lovers of Zion,” or “Israel Lovers”—was the name of an early Zionist movement that came to prominence in the Russian Empire after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II.

The assassins were not Jewish, though some of their associates were. But because Alexander II had liberalized Russia’s policies toward Jews, his successor, Alexander III, found it politically useful to scapegoat the Jews for his father’s murder.

A wave of brutal pogroms broke out across southwestern Russia—condoned, if not encouraged, by the tsarist regime.

On May 15, 1882—exactly 144 years ago today—Alexander III issued the “May Laws,” reversing his father’s reforms. Jews were confined to a small region called the Pale of Settlement, and their economic opportunities were severely restricted.

The Pale quickly became overcrowded and impoverished, and some Jewish leaders began urging people to leave Russia.

One of them was Leon Pinsker. Pinsker had long advocated for Jewish assimilation into European society, but the pogroms and the May Laws changed his thinking.

He became active in *Chovevei Tzion*, which sponsored pioneers to establish agricultural settlements in the Land of Israel.

Sounding the alarm, Pinsker argued that “We must reconcile ourselves once and for all to the idea that the other nations, by reason of their inherent natural antagonism, will forever reject us.”

“The world has become accustomed to regard the Jewish people as a nation which has no independent existence, no country, no government, no official representation.”¹

The only remedy, he said, was for the Jews to “become a nation again” and find a place where they could govern themselves. Notably, he did not believe it had to be the Land of Israel.

But another *Chovevei Tzion* thinker, Ahad Ha’am, believed deeply in *Eretz Yisrael*—though not necessarily in Jewish statehood. He feared that political sovereignty could compromise the moral and spiritual mission of the Jewish people.

His vision, instead, was for the Land of Israel to become the spiritual and cultural center of Jewish life. “[F]rom this center,” he wrote, “the spirit of Judaism will radiate...to all the communities of the Diaspora, to inspire them with new life and to preserve the overall unity of our people.”²

In the end, Herzl’s political Zionism—a more systematic version of Pinsker’s earlier idea—carried the day.

On May 14, 1948—78 years ago yesterday, and nearly 66 years to the day after the May Laws—David Ben-Gurion stood in Tel Aviv and declared the establishment of the State of Israel.

Reading from the Declaration of Independence, he proclaimed that the state “will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel” and “ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants. ...”³

Pinsker, Ahad Ha’am, Herzl, and other *Chovevei Zion* were surely smiling down from heaven that day.

But the founding of the state turned out to be just one milestone on a difficult road, and realizing their dream remains an ongoing endeavor.

Last month, the Pew Research Center found that 60 percent of American adults now hold unfavorable views of Israel, including a majority of Americans under 50.⁴

We’re inclined to attribute this to antisemitism—and for good reason. Over the centuries, Jews have been falsely accused of ritually murdering Christian children, poisoning wells during the Black Plague, secretly controlling the world, and causing mass starvation in Gaza.

If Nicholas Kristof has indeed slandered Israel with accusations of systematic prisoner abuse, as the Israeli government claims in its lawsuit, he would hardly be the first.

But as Israeli journalist Haviv Rettig Gur said this week: “Just because they’re lying...doesn’t mean there isn’t also, separately, a problem on the ground.”

“It’s nowhere near as much as the psychotic claims of these fantasists,” he said. “But it’s there nonetheless.”⁵

Ahad Ha’am warned that statehood might burden us with the messy realities of power—war, prisons, security, corruption, and scandal—and it would risk tarnishing the Jewish people’s moral reputation.

It’s hard, in my view, to say he was wrong to be concerned.

Because today, the term “Israel Lover”—once a proud moniker of Jews who dreamed the impossible—has, in some circles, become a slur.

Is that antisemitism? Absolutely.

But I hate that the Israeli government does things that make it easier for people to say it.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik taught that counting the Omer is a time to reflect on where we've been, where we are, and where we're headed.

The beauty of it is, no matter how winding and rocky the path has been, the Omer always points in one direction: toward Sinai.

Maybe, as we approach Shavuot next week and renew our covenant with God, what we Israel Lovers need most is to tune out the noise and just move toward Torah.

Toward the voice of the prophets. Toward the moral vision we set for ourselves.

And let it guide us through the wilderness.

1 Leon Pinsker, "Auto-Emancipation," <https://jewishvirtuallibrary.org/quot-auto-emancipation-quot-leon-pinsker>.

2 Quoted in David Kraemer, *Embracing Exile*, 157.

3 https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/israel.asp.

4 <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/04/07/negative-views-of-israel-netanyahu-continue-to-rise-among-americans-especially-young-people/>.

5 Haviv Rettig Gur, "A Response to Nicholas Kristof of the NYT," https://havivgur.substack.com?utm_source=navbar&utm_medium=web.