

## **Jews are Proxies in the Fight over Nationalism**

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Our tradition sees Shavuot not only as the defining moment in Jewish history, but also as a pivotal moment in the existence of the world.

The midrash says that God held the mountain over our heads and said: “If Israel will accept the Torah, good, and if not, the world will return to chaos and void.”<sup>1</sup>

In their spiritual imagination, the Sages understood that, in the existential battles human beings fight, the Jews so often stand at the center.

And so it is today.

War is raging in the Western world over nationalism. Not a military war, but a cultural and political one.

And I believe that we Jews have become the proxy through which pro- and anti-nationalist forces wage that war.

Georgetown political scientist Paul D. Miller explains that nationalism is the belief that humanity is divided into distinct cultural groups, each deserving political independence and loyalty, and that the government’s role is “to protect and promote the cultural identit[y]”<sup>2</sup> of its nation.

I can see two reasons why we became the proxy in this fight.

One is ancient. As Israel’s Declaration of Independence states, the Jewish people “gave to the world the eternal Book of Books”—the Hebrew Bible—which says that, after humanity banded together to build the Tower of Babel, God separated them into different peoples, different languages, and different lands.

So, it might be fair to say that nationalism has its ideological roots in Judaism’s most sacred text.

Proponents of nationalism tend to look favorably on that Jewish contribution. Opponents of nationalism do not.

The second reason is modern. It emerged from the Enlightenment and centers on a basic question: What, exactly, are the Jews?

Are we a religious community? Or are we a distinct *people*—a “nation” with a shared culture, history, and lineage?

Most Jews would say: We’re both. But the modern world doesn’t get what that means.

After the French Revolution, one member of the National Assembly famously declared: “The Jews should be denied everything as a nation but granted everything as individuals.”

“Every one of them must individually become a citizen.” Otherwise, he said, “we shall...be compelled to expel them. The existence of a nation within a nation is unacceptable to our country.”<sup>3</sup>

Liberal European thinkers argued that Jews were welcome to practice their religion privately, but aspirations to Jewish political sovereignty had no place in a secular society.

As historian Paul Mendes-Flohr puts it, “civil society...could not tolerate Judaism as a distinctive national culture.”<sup>4</sup>

Today’s antizionists—many of whom are broadly anti-nationalist—have embraced that way of thinking.

We saw this in extreme form this week when a congressional candidate in Texas said she wanted to turn an ICE detention facility into “a prison for American Zionists.”

But this wasn’t the only model to emerge in post-Enlightenment Europe.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a fierce debate over whether Germany should be a secular liberal state or “a *Volkstaat*”—a nation-state “with a distinctive Christian orientation.”<sup>5</sup>

Conservative German nationalists didn’t object to Jews keeping their culture or even supporting Zionism. But they insisted Jews could never fully belong because Germany was fundamentally Christian.

We could live there, they said—but only as guests, not as citizens.

Today’s American Christian nationalists have embraced a similar idea.

We saw one example this week when the Department of Homeland Security posted an image of a church and cross on its official X account with the words, “May our nation continue to be guided by the light of our Savior.”

This reflects a political ideology that, as sociologists Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry explain, distinguishes between “insiders and outsiders...and when those two must occupy the same country,”<sup>6</sup> insiders get to be on top of the social hierarchy while outsiders are on the bottom.

As one writer at a prominent Christian nationalist-oriented think tank puts it, “most people living in the United States today—certainly more than half—are not Americans in any meaningful sense of the term.”<sup>7</sup>

These people “may technically be citizens of the United States,” he says, “but [they] are no longer (if they ever were) *Americans*.”

Why? Because they don’t believe in the values that “define America as a nation and as a people.”

They are “citizen-aliens,” he says; “non-American Americans”; “something *else*.”<sup>8</sup>

And what rights, exactly, should such outsiders have? He doesn’t say. But it doesn’t bode well for them.

We Jews have become the proxy in this larger struggle between secular anti-nationalism and Christian nationalism.

The first group hates Israel because it is a nationalist state and it uses power to preserve its cultural identity.

Anti-nationalists target Jews because many of us continue to embrace Jewish peoplehood and Jewish sovereignty.

The second group loves Israel for the same reasons the others hate it: because Israel is a nationalist state and it uses power to preserve its cultural identity. They'd like America to do that, too.

Some also believe America should privilege "real Americans"—and "real Americans" are Christian.

For our part, we Jews are ambivalent.

We want pluralistic democracy in America because it guarantees our full political rights. And we want nationalist democracy in Israel because it guarantees Jewish sovereignty.

I wonder if we can sustain that dichotomy over the long term.

In the meantime, once again, we find ourselves at the center of a conflict far bigger than our tiny percentage of the world population or our little state in the Middle East.

The Sages had it right.

As we stand again at Sinai, the mountain is still hanging over our heads—and the future of the world is hanging in the balance.

1 *Midrash K'li Yakar*, Deut. 32:1; b. Shabbat 88a.

2 Paul D. Miller, *The Religion of American Greatness*, 5.

3 The Count of Claremont-Tonnerre, quoted in Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz, *The Jew in the Modern World*, 115.

4 Paul Mendes-Flohr, "The Emancipation of European Jewry. Why Was It Not Self-Evident?" 18.

5 *Ibid.*, 19.

6 Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 101.

7 Glen Elmers, as quoted in Gorski and Perry, 101. Read Elmers' full article here: <https://americanmind.org/salvo/why-the-claremont-institute-is-not-conservative-and-you-shouldnt-be-either/>.

8 Elmers, *Ibid.*