

## What Do We Mean When We Say “Zionism”?

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It has been a brutal week for American Jews.

The terms “Zionism” and “anti-Zionism” are dominating the headlines and political campaigns—and not in a good way.

But do they even know what it means?

For that matter, do we?

Dr. Andrew Rehfeld, the president of Hebrew Union College, recently said that the terms “Zionism” and “anti-Zionism” have become shibboleths, or code words, we use to decide whether someone is on our side or not. But most people—Jews included—can’t explain them in any meaningful way.

Most think Zionism simply means supporting Israel and anti-Zionism means opposing it. But that is far too simplistic.

In Parashat Chukat, the Torah uses the categories of “pure” and “impure” to separate one Jew from another.

Today we use different categories—“Zionist” and “anti-Zionist.” But they often function the same way: as shorthand for deciding who belongs in our community and who doesn’t.

People who express unorthodox views become immediately suspect, and pressure mounts on them to conform. As our parashah says: “If anyone who has become impure fails to undergo cleansing, that person shall be cut off from the congregation.”<sup>1</sup>

Given the stakes, it’s important to understand the ideas behind these terms.

The question at the heart of the conversation is deceptively simple: What is Am Yisrael—the Jewish people?

The historian Noam Pianko (who will be our scholar-in-residence next March) gives a definition that most can agree on: Am Yisrael is the Jewish collective bound together by “a shared sense of obligation and connection.”<sup>2</sup>

But beyond that basic premise, Jewish thinkers have offered strikingly different answers over the past two centuries.

Let me briefly introduce four of them.

The first understands Am Yisrael as a political entity—or, in modern parlance, a “nation.”

Its best-known representatives are Theodor Herzl and Ze’ev Jabotinsky. They saw Am Yisrael as a discrete people with a shared history, culture, and language that possesses the right to govern itself.

For Herzl, Jewish sovereignty was the only long-term answer to antisemitism. For Jabotinsky, a nation without the ability to defend itself was not truly free.

Both were secular Jews, and religion played little role in their political theory. Jewish self-rule was their main goal.

The modern Israeli philosopher Yeshayahu Liebowitz summed up this view when he said, "Zionism is the expression of our being fed up with being ruled by Goyim."<sup>3</sup>

A second approach understands Am Yisrael as a "civilization."

Its leading voices are Ahad Ha'am and Mordecai Kaplan.

They believed Zionism's primary purpose was to renew Jewish literature, ethics, learning, religious practice, music, and communal life. But they differed on the importance of the Land of Israel.

Ahad Ha'am believed Eretz Yisrael should be the cultural center from which Jewish creativity would illuminate the Diaspora. Kaplan believed Jewish civilization could flourish wherever Jews lived.

But for both men, political sovereignty was secondary. Jewish cultural renewal was the focus of their Zionism.

A third approach understands Am Yisrael primarily as a "faith community."

Moses Mendelssohn, the first to espouse this view, argued that Judaism is about private belief and practice. Jews could be loyal citizens of the countries in which they lived, since, in his view, religion and state should be totally separate.

Classical Reform rabbis such as David Einhorn and Kaufmann Kohler embraced Mendelssohn's vision. They believed Am Yisrael had a God-given mission to bring Jewish ethics to humanity everywhere. To do that, Jews needed to live in the Diaspora.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the father of Modern Orthodoxy, also emphasized Am Yisrael's religious mission over political nationalism. But for him, the Jewish mission was to scrupulously uphold the Torah wherever they lived.

Mendelssohn and Hirsch died before modern Zionism emerged, so we don't know how they would have responded to it. Einhorn and Kohler, however, rejected Zionism because they believed that building a Jewish state would distract Am Yisrael from being "a light unto the nations."

The fourth approach understands Am Yisrael as something deeper than any modern category like nation, culture, or religion can capture.

For the two major proponents of this view, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum, Am Yisrael is first and foremost God's eternal covenantal community, created at Sinai for the sake of Torah alone.

From there, however, they reached opposite conclusions.

Rav Kook became the spiritual founder of religious, or theological, Zionism.

He was an observant Orthodox Jew, but he believed God was working through the secular Zionist movement.

Political sovereignty mattered deeply to him. But unlike Herzl and Jabotinsky, Rav Kook did not see Jewish statehood as the end-goal. Rather, it would be but one stage in the cosmic process of divine redemption.

The holiness of the Land and the spiritual awakening of the Jewish people were the heart of his Zionist vision.

By contrast, Rabbi Teitelbaum—better known as the Satmar Rebbe—became the most prominent voice of theological anti-Zionism.

Like Rav Kook, he had faith that Am Yisrael was destined to be restored to sovereignty in Eretz Yisrael by God. But he believed the Jewish people were commanded to wait patiently for the coming of the Messiah and not try to make it happen on their own.

The Satmar Rebbe condemned the secular Zionists for seizing a role that rightfully belongs to God and warned they would bring catastrophe upon the Jewish people.

His followers today see themselves as pro-Israel but anti-Zionist. Go figure that.

All this shows that there is no one thing called “Zionism,” nor is there a single thing called “anti-Zionism.”

Both describe families of ideas built upon different understandings of Am Yisrael.

The temptation in our polarized age is to reduce everything to slogans and loyalty tests. But Reform Judaism asks us to be curious, unafraid of complexity, and willing to listen before we judge.

We believe Judaism is strengthened—not weakened—by serious learning.

So, next time someone says, “I’m a Zionist,” or “I’m an anti-Zionist,” don’t assume.

Ask them what they mean.

You might discover that, even today, the Jewish conversation is far richer than our politics would have us believe.

1 Num. 19:22.

2 Noam Pianko, *Jewish Peoplehood: An American Innovation*, 65.

3 As quoted in Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion*, 65.