

Zionism and the *Galus Yid*

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In a recent speech to his followers, Rabbi Zalman Leib Teitelbaum, the rebbe of the Satmar Hasidic community in Kiryas Joel, bemoaned the fact that many Jews have been criticizing the mayor of New York for his anti-Israel rhetoric.¹

Such criticism, he said, amounts to the “terrible sin” of “provoking the nations.”

You see, according to the Talmud, God sent us into exile after the destruction of the Temple and made us swear that we would not rebel against the rule of the gentile nations among whom we live.²

The Jews’ role in exile is to passively submit to the local ruler, strictly observe the Torah, stay out of trouble, and wait for God to bring us back to Eretz Yisrael.

This attitude seems bizarre and tone-deaf to our modern ears and, indeed, it is a minority view amongst Jews today. But this image of the passive Jew—hunched over, nose buried in a book—was the prevailing Jewish self-image for many centuries.

Not because of self-hatred or antisemitism, but because most Jews saw this way of being as the embodiment of virtue.

It goes back to our patriarch Jacob. The Torah says that his twin brother, Esau, was a hunter and an outdoorsman, muscular and brutish.

Jacob, by contrast, was known as “*yoshev ohalim*,”³ a homebody who liked to sit in the tent, with his mother, reading.

Since Jacob became the patriarch of the Jewish people, we adopted his qualities as virtues and Esau’s as vices.

We revered intellectualism and rigorous learning and scorned physicality and force.

Time spent on developing your body was seen as *goyish* and *bittul Torah*—a blasphemous waste of time that should have been spent in study.

In this traditional view represented today by Reb Zalman Leib, any assertion of power by Jews against gentile rulers contradicts the virtuous ideal of the “*galus yid*,” the “exile Jew,” that God wants us to be.

A few weeks ago, I told you that I do see a certain beauty and humility in this worldview because it centers not on achievement and power, but on being content with the blessings God has given us in the here and now.

But I simply cannot agree with the Satmar rebbe that challenging antisemitic politicians, asserting a right to self-determination in a small piece of our ancient homeland, and defending that right with military force when necessary is an affront to God.

This week's parashah teaches us the *halakhah* of the "*rodef*," the "pursuer."⁴

According to Jewish law, if you see that someone is pursuing another with the intent to kill them, you are obligated to intervene to save the life of the one being pursued—even if that means you have to injure or, God forbid, kill the pursuer to do so.

And if you're obligated to save another person from a *rodef*, says the Talmud, then you are also obligated to save yourself from one. In Judaism, self-defense is a *mitzvah*.

The Talmud states this clearly, but it took Jewish culture a long time to come around to the idea. Ever since Rome beat back a couple of Jewish rebellions nearly 2,000 years ago, we generally chose to remain passive and submissive.

That is, until a new movement came along in the 19th century and said, "no more."

That movement was Zionism.

Return to Eretz Yisrael, of course, was central to Zionism. But for that to be possible, the Jews would need to embrace a new self-image.

In some sense, the meta-aim of the Zionist movement was—and still is—to reject the *galus yid* as our ideal of virtue.

Max Nordau, who cofounded the original Zionist Organization with Theodor Herzl, called for a new "muscular Jewry" to counter the long-held perception of Jews as nebbishy and weak.

At the Second Zionist Congress in 1898, Nordau said⁵:

"The history of our people relates to the fact that we were once strong physically...but today that is not the case. Others succeeded in degenerating us physically. They made the ghetto Jews of the Middle Ages into sorrow weaklings, haggard and unable to defend ourselves in the narrow alleyways of the Ghetto."

"It is true that our muscles have been weakened and that our attitudes and postures are not always satisfactory," he said, "but when Jews do engage in sport their defects vanish, their postures improve, their muscles become strong and their general health gets better."

"We will renew our youth in our aging years," he pledged. "We will develop wide chests, strong arms and legs, a brave look. We will be warriors."

We might disagree about whether Am Yisrael is a nation, a civilization, a religion, or something else.

We might disapprove of the Israeli government's policies or its conduct of the Gaza war, and we should certainly condemn the blatant racism of some of its officials.

We have strong internal Jewish disagreements about the borders of Israel, whether the state should be religious or secular, and who should control the Western Wall.

But Nordau's words demonstrate that Zionism is fundamentally about refusing to be pushed around. The Zionist tent is big enough for everyone who believes that it's virtuous for us Jews to stand up for ourselves.

In our daily morning minyan, we say, "*Barukh atah Adonai, eloheinu melekh ha-olam, zokeif k'fufim*—Blessed are You Adonai our God, ruler of the universe, who straightens the bent.

So, stand up straight. Be confident and proud of who you are.

To be a Zionist is, at its core, to refuse to be the *galus yid* ever again.

1 See a clip from Reb Zalman Leib's speech on Frieda Vitzel's YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/qdS-A6W8KnQ>.

2 See b. Ketubot 111a.

3 *Genesis* 25:27.

4 The Talmud locates the law of the *rodef* in the passages about the stubborn and rebellious son (*Deut.* 21:18-21) and the engaged maiden who is a victim of rape (*Deut.* 22:23-26). See b. Sanhedrin chapter 8 for an extended discussion of the law of the *rodef*.

5 Max Nordau, "Muscular Jewry," address to the Second Zionist Congress. These excerpts, taken from www.maccabiworld.org, are not necessarily in order, as I do not have access to the original text of the speech.