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The Politics of Loyalty

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It is in vogue to say that liberal Zionism is in crisis. Last summer's war in Gaza provoked a spate of essays purporting that the confrontation between liberal values and the policies of a hawkish Israel were making the ideology untenable. In this portrayal, liberal Zionism was a precarious political ideology that entailed support for the State of Israel while believing that the state had to express progressive values, and that history and politics were conspiring to unmake an ideology and prove it to have been feeble and unrealistic all along.

This portrayal is the result of an unwitting conspiracy between right and left. Several thinkers on the left — Peter Beinart, Alan Wolfe and others — locate the failure of Zionism in the growing ideological divide between the younger generation and the American Jewish “establishment” and its support for an Israeli government which acts at cross-purposes with the central Jewish values important to most American Jews.

Their discomfort, also expressed after the recent Israeli elections, provides fodder for this thesis, namely, that Zionism is contingent on the absence of dissonance between Israel and the values significant for American Jewish identity. The belief is that discord creates a crisis resulting first in “distancing” from Israel and, eventually, a collapse of the ideology and the relationship altogether.

To the right, the struggles of liberal Zionists are a source of glee and triumphalism. They affirm the right's belief that their opponents' ideology was fragile all along and implicitly connect it to the struggle for survival of liberal Judaism, which is suffering from its abandonment of Jewish particularity. The rise of anti-Semitism in Europe — and perhaps also on American college campuses, which the right is tracking carefully and presenting as

a crisis — signals an essential Jewish “otherness” that liberal Zionists and their universalist values never took seriously.

This is a challenging moment for me. I am an American Jew deeply connected personally, professionally, and spiritually to the State of Israel. I have struggled recently through periods of deep disappointment bordering on outrage about actions undertaken by the State and trends that signal the rise of antidemocratic tendencies among the electorate. I have also felt a deep sense of impotence as a non-citizen and non-resident who is both implicated — out of a good sense of Jewish peoplehood — in the actions of the State of Israel, as well as in the behavior of Jewish communal organizations that sometimes give cover to these actions, and are largely incapable, except through complicated networks of influence, to lead toward processes of change.

To paraphrase David Hartman, ז”ל, Israel has lost the quality of being primarily a “naches machine” for American Jews; it is now exporting meaningful quantities of disappointment.

But the issue now is not me, and it is not Israel; the problem we face is that both the right and the left have misconstrued and misrepresented liberal Zionism. The problem of the moment is not merely one of identities, but of ideas.

Simply put, one of the greatest philosophical mistakes we Jews made following the creation of Israel was the too-quick transformation of Zionism from a discourse of imagination into a discourse of loyalty.

Consider the breathtaking diversity of Zionist ideas and dreams prior to the creation of the State of Israel. In Jewish educational environments such as my own, we were taught to think of these in strict categories. Political Zionism aimed to solve “the Jewish problem” of intrinsic, unending alienation from the structures of power and authority with a nationalist response. Religious Zionism sought to reconcile deep-seated longings for a return to the land and for the messianic age with an open window of political possibility that could achieve pieces of those longings, even incrementally. Cultural Zionism sought to retrieve the spiritual integrity of the Jewish People after millennia of dislocation, dispersion, and cultural deracination.

In this account, in spite of the competition among these ideas, each thinker and movement is afforded a pride of place in a (retrospectively) collaborative project. Some aspects of this wide network of ideas succeeded more than others and had greater staying power within the State once it finally arrived. But this retrospective narrative validated different ideas as partners in the solving of a Big Problem — the absence of statehood and statecraft — and enabled the translation of those ideas to the mechanics of running the state once we had it.

This understanding of Zionism yields a devastating demand for those who would inherit its legacy: Now that we have a state, we focus on defending and protecting what we have. Sure, ideology still persists and matters, and we see the veins and arteries of those

ideologies in the living and breathing organism of the state: some bulging at times and others weaker, some infused with oxygen and some starved. Now that the body is born and named, however, our job becomes to shelter it rather than fantasize about what it will be.

There is a different way to understand the story of Zionism, which is to interpret it as a messier, more violent, and yet inherently pluralistic competition of imagination, because pluralism can mean that no full knowledge of truth is possible, and because power structures are such that no ideology is capable of seizing the kind of consensus or authority to make other ideas impossible or untenable.

The real legacy of that moment in Jewish history was not extra-parliamentary relics such as the strange, idiosyncratic World Zionist Congress, whose function was to fantasize about what might be possible, or even the State itself, but the shared, collective project engaged in a diverse dance between pragmatism and fantasy.

Why did we let this Zionism go? There were urgent demands once the State had been created, and these befell both its Jewish inhabitants and their diaspora brethren, who substituted philanthropy and advocacy for the physical work of nation building as acts of loyalty to the project. But Zionism then became essentially only a means of perpetuating the political choices that had emerged from the pre-State ideological mess — choices now invested with the imprimatur of majority choice, political leadership, and gradually, precedent.

This was a great loss to the Jewish people, and the costs have not been fully realized. The transformation of a language of longing for a place, into the mechanics of loyalty to a place in which we have arrived, is a dramatic, emotionally wrought choice we did altogether too quickly, and whose emotional consequences we have suppressed at our peril. Our historical narratives of actual arrival in the Promised Land are few and far between; we have far, far more stories, from the banishment from Eden through the Babylonian Exile and beyond, of wanderings and alienations, accompanied by a ceaseless longing to return home. This longing for home is an essential feature of what it means to be Jewish. By what hubris do we now pretend that the fantasizing of the possible is easily replaced by mere perpetuation of new status quos?

Retrieving Zionism as an imaginative discourse for the Jewish people is the best answer to the “crisis” of liberal Zionism. To the left, I say: Separating Judaism and Zionism and treating them as discrete projects is a deep misunderstanding of both. Zionism is the discourse of what the Jewish people can make possible in the longing for a return to Zion.

It may manifest in different choices and may translate to different political realities, but a Zionist Jew sees opportunity and is challenged by what is not present to make it so; it has been, and could be again, the greatest project of Jewish spiritual, religious, political, and cultural renewal our people has ever seen.

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To the right, which accuses liberal Zionists of betraying Israel with their agitation that it be better, I demand to know: When did Judaism tolerate — much less legislate — complacency?

Liberal Zionism should rehabilitate the “ought” of Israel as a legitimate discourse that neither rejects the country’s accomplishments nor seeks to improve it except through its own democratic processes, empowering it in the spirit of a Maimonidean messianic longing which knows that sovereignty is only the beginning of an opportunity to do something great, to enact the visions of justice and righteousness that our tradition demands become the enduring legacy of the Jewish people.

This is the future of liberal Zionism: reclaiming its past glory as the activity of Jews in Israel and around the world to transform the State of Israel into a platform for fulfilling the wildest fantasies of Jewish imagination. This new/old Zionist conversation will be and must be even messier than it already is, and our community must foster more comfort than the politics of loyalty generally allow with the anxieties this messiness engenders. We Jews can take it; we have seen much worse than what is possible when we foster profound debate on what our collective future should look like. After all, where would the State of Israel be without it?

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