

Dr. Michael Livni

## **WHAT IS ZIONISM? WHAT IS LABOR ZIONISM?**

Zionism is the noun. LABOR is the adjective. Hence, first of all, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the noun – ZIONISM.

ZIONISM is the national movement of the Jewish people for self-realization in its historic homeland – the Land of Israel. Two complementary dynamics, POLITICAL ZIONISM and CULTURAL ZIONISM propelled the emergence of Zionism from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the present.

Both POLITICAL and CULTURAL ZIONISM are based on the assumption that the Jews are a PEOPLE with a common national identity, whether in Israel or in the Diaspora. That identity stems from a common past narrative and history – a common collective memory. Our national identity sets us apart from other peoples in the present and will continue to do so in the future.<sup>1, 2</sup> ,

The assumption that "we are one people" negates the definition of the Jews as a race or religion. It also assumes an essential unity of the Jewish people – whether in Israel or whether in the Diaspora<sup>3</sup>

POLITICAL ZIONISM emerged under the leadership of Theodor Herzl as a response to the misery and persecution of the Jews in much of Europe together with the rising tide of modern anti-Semitism in many of the lands in which they lived. The focus of political Zionism was to realize physical and economic security for Jews, "like all the nations", in their historic homeland. Political Zionism sought a state for the Jews in order to SAVE JEWS.

Since the establishment of Israel as an independent state, its political fate is in the hands of the citizens of Israel. Hence, in the Diaspora, political Zionism has become pro-Israelism. However, this does not preclude Diaspora Jews from expressing opinion or criticizing the Israeli government regarding specific political decisions.

In particular, Diaspora Jews have a right and even an obligation to express themselves on issues concerning political decisions affecting Jewish pluralism and hence impact on personal Jewish identity of Jews, both in Israel and in the Diaspora.

CULTURAL ZIONISM<sup>4</sup> evolved from the writings of Achad Ha'am and the perceived threat to the continued viability of Judaism in the modern world. Physical and cultural assimilation were seen as threats to both the viability as well as the vitality of Jewish civilization. Cultural Zionists believe that continued renewal of the Jewish people necessitates a National Home in its historic homeland. Cultural Zionism was/is concerned with the cultural quality of the physical (political) framework. It sought TO SAVE and REVITALIZE JUDAISM in the post-traditional world.<sup>5</sup>

As the National Home of ALL the Jewish people, the rights of all current expressions of Judaism remain a legitimate concern of all Jews who identify with cultural Zionism's aim of ensuring the creative continuity of "Jewish Civilization" (Mordecai Kaplan).

After the initial realization of political Zionism, prominent Zionist leaders in the Diaspora, active in the struggle to achieve a Jewish state, realized that the focus would now be on cultural Zionism.<sup>6</sup> Cultural Zionism transcends political Zionism and embodies the continuing oneness of Jews and Judaism in Israel and the Diaspora.

## **LABOR ZIONISM.**

Repeat: ZIONISM is the noun. LABOR is the adjective. What is the special "color" of LABOR ZIONISM within Zionism?

On the core issue within political Zionism, the position of Labor Zionism is:

Two States for Two Peoples – Yes.

Return of descendants of Palestinian refugees to Israel – No.<sup>7</sup>

The Labor Zionist idea constitutes a particular stream within cultural Zionism. It is committed to the continued creative renewal of Judaism for which it deems the Jewish State to be essential.

### **WITHIN THAT CONTEXT:**

1. Labor Zionism is committed to DEMOCRACY and CULTURAL PLURALISM both in Israel and in the Diaspora.
2. Inspired by the prophetic tradition within the Jewish heritage, Labor Zionism seeks to utilize that heritage to further SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE. "Justice, justice shalt thou pursue...". (Deut. 16:20)<sup>8</sup>
3. Within the home and within Jewish communities, Labor Zionism utilizes symbols and rituals of togetherness to create bonds, emotional and cognitive. These symbols

express themselves in the celebration of the weekly and annual time cycle as well as communally marked rites of passage of individuals within that community.

4. Both in Israel and in the Diaspora, Labor Zionism strives to create INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY<sup>9</sup>, urban and non-urban, which reflects a way of life (*Torat Chaim*) whose ultimate concern is a life of purpose. That purpose is embodied in the concept of TIKKUN OLAM – mending and transforming the world. Mending and transforming the world necessitates personal and communal engagement with and within the surrounding society and environment. Tikkun Olam is a POLITICAL process.

5. Tikkun Olam, mending and transformation, involves the individual, the community and the world. "Think globally – Act locally". The Labor Zionist intentional communities, urban and non-urban, will strive to realize, "in micro", the way of life they seeks to project into the surrounding society "in macro".

6. Labor Zionism sees the concept of the God Idea as a unifying symbol for the people of Israel (*Clal Yisrael*). Labor Zionism rejects transcendent authority (e.g. Divinely ordained Torah, Divine supervision of human fate). "The past has a voice – not a veto" (Mordecai Kaplan)

7. Labor Zionism sees education, formal and informal, both in Israel and in the Diaspora as the central means for inculcating a Labor Zionist way of life. In particular, Labor Zionism sees a properly structured year in Israel after high school as a desirable norm in Diaspora Jewish education. Such programs should expose young people, cognitively and experientially, to options of purposive<sup>10</sup> Aliya such as intentional communities committed to Labor Zionist ideals.

**It is important to note that it is the synergy between all of the above which defines Labor Zionism and the Labor Zionist outlook.**

## **Endnotes.**

<sup>1</sup>*I think the Jewish question is no more a social than a religious one, notwithstanding that it sometimes takes these and other forms. It is a national question, which can only be solved by making it a political world-question to be discussed and settled by the civilized nations of the world in council.*

*We are a People – one People.*

Theodor Herzl, **The State for the Jews** (Der Judenstaat), 1896 – Introduction.

<sup>2</sup> "...the formation of viable spiritual bonds, the deepening of mutual identity and translating it into concrete acts – that is the task of Zionism today. That is what Herzl meant when he said that even after the establishment of the State, the Zionist Congress will go on."

Yaakov Herzog, 1921-1972 (Israel's ambassador to Canada, younger brother of Chaim Herzog, sixth President of Israel). Address to the Zionist Organization of Canada on Israel-Diaspora relations, marking the centenary of Herzl's birth, November 1960 - in "Theodor Herzl", AM L'BADAD YISHKON (Hebrew), Sifriat Maariv, Tel Aviv 1975, p. 128. (Translated – M.L.)

<sup>3</sup> "Whatever our geographical or economical differences may be, it is my absolute conviction that the oneness of our people is of an ontological\* nature. Whoever chooses one against the others, cannot be

*defined as truly Jewish. Whoever attempts to oppose Israel to the Diaspora, or vice-versa, inevitably will betray both in the end."*

*Elie Wiesel, "Two Images, One Destiny", Jewish Agency Assembly, Jerusalem, June 1974.*

\*Ontological = an essential part of being.

<sup>4</sup> Cultural Zionism is concerned with all aspects of non-material culture – beliefs, values, norms of behavior, social and political organization, relation to sacred and profane in time.  
"Religious Zionism" is a particular kind of Cultural Zionism.

<sup>5</sup> *"If, as we hope, there is to be third (Jewish State) its fundamental principle on the national as well as the individual plane will be neither the ascendancy of body over spirit nor the suppression of the body for the spirit's sake but the uplifting of the body by the spirit."*

Achad Ha'am, "Flesh and Spirit", (1904), in Arthur Herzberg, THE ZIONIST IDEA, 1957, p. 260.

<sup>6</sup> *...It was fortunate that the sound political vision and program of Theodor Herzl governed the course of the (Zionist) movement until the State was established...But Herzl's political triumph now paves the way for the vision which was Achad Ha-am's – that of a radiating center in a reconstituted Jewish State which would also serve as a unifying influence for world Jewry. .. The Jewish communities of the Diaspora will look eagerly for all stimulating influence which might emanate from Israel. But Diaspora Jewry need not remain a mere passive recipient of outside cultural influences. It can become, as indeed so often in the past it did become, creative in its own right, ...*

Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF AMERICAN JEWRY, 1950.

<sup>7</sup> This reflects the *de facto* Labor Zionist position since the acceptance of partition in 1947. In 2018, the National Council of the Kibbutz movement reaffirmed the principle of Two States for Two Peoples. This position left open questions such as borders, Jerusalem, a Jewish minority in the Palestinian state.

<sup>8</sup> An expression of this idea can be found in the writings of A.D, Gordon (1920):  
"We created words for the nature of our Land and said 'The human created in the Image of God'...Now we come to create a new saying for this nature that lives within us: a people in the Image of God...:This is the basis of our idea, the idea of the renaissance and redemption; this is the basis of the idea,'nation-man'."

<sup>9</sup> Intentional Community – people who live together because of shared values and ideals as well as a shared action program to influence surrounding society on the basis of those values and ideals.

<sup>10</sup> What does "purposive Aliya" mean? From the writings of A.D. Gordon—there are three inferences:

1. The individual making Aliya seeks a life of purpose.
2. The individual has made a decision that for him/ her a life of purpose means taking a personal part in the Hebrew Renaissance in Eretz Israel .
3. The physical act of Aliya does not, in and of itself, ensure a life of purpose. A life without purpose is "Galut" – Exile. There can be a "life of Galut, anywhere – including Eretz Israel.

*"As long as no change has occurred within me in the reason for life, I should not seek a new life, for I shall not find it. A new life is first and foremost a new purpose for living...the essence of it all (is) Life of the Hour (Chayei Shah) that has within it Life Eternal (Chayei Olam)..."*

*"Two paths lie before us in Eretz Israel: The path of Galut life (Exilic life) and the path of Renaissance which we wish to follow. Let everyone choose as they see fit...but those who choose the path of Renaissance, let them not, in fact, follow the path of Galut. Galut is always Galut and there is no less Galut in Eretz Israel than Galut in any other country." - A.D. Gordon (1911).*

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