

Nations, Nationalism and Zionism

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Every now and then I stumble upon a discussion about Zionism and Israel. Most often these discussions are characterized by two opposing perceptions of Zionism. The first states that Zionism is an evil atheist/Satanic anti-Jewish ideology, attempting to destroy, or take advantage of “true Judaism”. The other states that Zionism is a “true” representation of the millennia-old Jewish longing for redemption, expressed in the Biblical writings and Rabbinic teachings. Or at least the perceptions are found somewhere between these two perceptions.

Both are wrong but have elements of truth to them.

Zionism is an ideology that incorporates Judaic symbols and myths, to prove its own authenticity, and could only have been thought of in the context of the nationalist movements appearing in the late 18th century/early 19th century. As such Zionism is a modern ideology, which only existed as a concept since the late mid-19th century. It is also a secular ideology, as far as we are talking about political Zionism and not Religious Zionism (which I will not be dealing with here). This should be clear when we consider the pioneers of Zionism and the found fathers. Almost all lived in non-religious settings and held less than neutral views of religion.

At the same time, Zionism is connected to an old Jewish yearning for redemption and wish to restore the people as a “nation” (only in modern times does this term give real sense). It is undeniable that the early Zionist acted out of a hope for the Jews as an independent people, sovereign in their own country, where Jewish culture could blossom. Even though the enlightenment promised equality for the Jews, several incidents proved to the early Zionists that this would always stay a promised not fulfilled. The Damascus affair¹, the pogroms, the Dreyfus-affair², and [the] always insisting antisemitic encounters, were more than telling for the Jews. Not

even assimilation would change this, as Moses Hess sarcastically noted, when he stated that it was not so much the Jewish religion the non-Jews hated, as it was the Jewish nose and that the Jewish nose could not be assimilated.

Yet, understanding that Zionism was a modern phenomenon does not explain us a lot, besides that this was – in some way or another – something new. But how was it something new, and why did it happen when it did?

To explain this I will refer to two theories on nationalism, those of Benedict Anderson and Anthony D. Smith. While many see their theories as opposing each other, I believe that they complement each other.

Imagined Communities

In short, Benedict Anderson sees a nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” What is meant is that a nation is imagined in that sense, that the citizens – of even the smallest nation – will never meet all the other citizens or even hear about them, yet they will still feel a sense of belonging to each other, based on being part of this specific nation – at times even experiencing this sense of belonging as stronger than that one might feel to a person next door, who is considered not to belong to the same nation. These nations are always limited, since no matter how many members they are considered to have, they will have a finite number. And they are considered sovereign, because they are controlled by the members of the nation itself – or if by God, at least directly so. And finally, it is a community because members of the nation consider themselves ready to die or at least to defend the nation, no matter the internal differences within the nation itself.

The nations, according to Anderson, only came to existence because of the developments in the late 18th-early 19th century, with what he describes as the “print capitalism”. By this he means the ability to profit from the printing press, whether it’s newspapers, books, or something third. This obviously came with better education and a greater number of people who could read.

This new feature – not the printing press itself, but how it was used – made it possible for several people to connect around local relevant news or romantic stories told into their lives, in a language that they spoke on a daily basis, if not near it. This also helped to make certain languages dominant in certain regions, making one dialect being more dominant than others.

The nation-states, based on this idea of an “imagined community”, first came to existence outside Europe. This happened in the Americas. It is true that France was among one of the first states to be based on republican ideas. But when we consider the process in the Americas, we see several states being founded on the premise of a nation for all its citizens in the early part of the 19th century: States that were not differing – *de jure* – between the various groups constituting the respective nations.

The establishment of the nation-states in the Americas then gave European states a model to base themselves on, having the republican concepts of a state consisting of its inhabitants as equal citizens take root.

The idea about the Jews forming their own nation and creating a state on that premise fits in perfectly here. The revival of Hebrew as a secular language, being used for mundane purposes, and the many Hebrew publications, made it possible for Jews all over Europe to connect with each other, communicating in a language which was theirs. The “print capitalism” made the publication industry possible, and the concept of a nation-state, of course, proved to the Jews that they indeed could exist as their own “imagined community”, at the same time limited and sovereign.

But Anderson’s theory does not explain everything. As he tells it, the new nation-states integrated different vernaculars and religious minorities into the new nation-states. Why not the Jews? While Jews certainly did integrate into their respective states, it has only been to a certain extent, which the process of Jews immigrating to Israel or other states have shown. *Something prevented the Jews from fully integrating into the majority society they lived in, and*

become fully “German”, “Spanish” etc., the same way Catholics in Germany became fully “German”.

Also, while Catholics are gathered under the Pope, we rarely see Catholics from for example Poland, Ireland and Germany relate to each other the same way we might see Jews from Spain, England, and Sweden relate to each other. *If the Jews existed as just another religious minority in the various countries, why did they share this idea of a togetherness so strong, that they insisted on becoming a nation, deserving their own state?* What made a Moses Hess from Germany and a Leon Pinsker from Russia being so aware of a shared identity, that they thought it was stronger than their respective German and Russian identities?

Ethnie and ations

Here we need Anthony D. Smith and his theory of the ‘ethnie’ origins as a basis for the creation of the modern nations.

As such Smith does not disagree with Anderson, when it comes to the processes behind the creation of the modern nation-state. What he points out, though, is that there was something before, something that already connected groups of people to a point, that they later accepted the notion of becoming this or that particular nation. The Danes, for example, did not consist of different groups with nothing to do with each other, though *Judes?* [*Jutes*] and *Copenhagernes?* [*Copenhageners*] certainly might have felt estranged from each other in some ways (something which Danes jokingly reminisce even today). The Danes were, of course, gathered under the same crown, but that in itself does not explain it. Let’s look at one case, which attests to this:

Denmark and Sweden have a long history of hostilities. One of those let to Sweden taking over Scania (Skåne), Halland, and Blekinge, which today forms the southern part of Sweden. They were taken over in the mid-17th century but only became Swedish in the beginning of the 18th century. Until that part, the people living in these regions were considered Danish, who spoke Danish and felt part of the “Danish people” – something which is still the case for some even today (though that seems to be

romantic longings for the imagined better past). But from 1720 until the 19th century, the region was undergoing a forced assimilation process, making the inhabitants “Swedish”. Danish was forbidden, and only Swedish allowed to be taught. But until this process was finished, we see that some active process – how wrong we might view it today – was needed to make the “Danes” become “Swedes”. These Danes under Swedish rule still felt a connection to the rest of the Danish people, even if they weren’t under Danish rule. Something must have made them feel this way, more than just having a Danish king.

Smith points out that ‘ethnie’, groups of people with a shared memory, based on a certain frame of “myth-symbols”, such as that of the Danes (and Swedes), were essential for the formation of nation-states in modern time. These nation-states didn’t come out of nowhere, not even in the Americas, where Anderson’s print capitalism might have been the deciding factor for the formation of the nations as they became to be. These myth-symbols can go far back or be more recent. They can be formed of different kind of memories, of a golden age, of wars, if not something else. But they all have in common that they help define who is part of the group, and who is not.

The Jews share this sense of a shared history. It is not just the religion they have in common, but the longing for their lost homeland, the experience of being oppressed, a certain idea of ethnic relations, and so on. Hebrew, though not a mundane vernacular, helped the Jews to communicate with each other. They used this to establish business connections with each other across the known world.

The Triggers

But yet, with the promise of equality of the enlightenment, what caused the Jews to accept the idea of becoming an independent nation? I mentioned earlier some incidents which can have been part of the reason for this. In his youth, Moses Hess, a German-French Jew, with a socialist outlook, refused to accept the idea of a Jewish people. He believed that it would be best for the Jews to

leave their “Jewishness” behind them and assimilate into the majority society they lived among. But the particular incident with the Damascus affair¹ changed his views. After that he no longer believed that the Jews could become part of the other people, but were deemed to either stay strangers or insist on their own nation.

Theodor Herzl had later some of the same revelation with the Dreyfus-affair² and the following demonstrations with chants of “Dead to the Jews”, just as the Russian Jews experienced the pogroms, which convinced them of the need for a sovereign Jewish state.

Acknowledging that “we, as Jews”, were unwanted – even when trying to unshed the “Jews”, no matter where one would look, could lead only to one conclusion: the Jews as a nation, must insist on a state of their own, just as all other nations would have their states. If the Jews could not become part of these nations, then let the nations give the Jews a place to call theirs, and in the process get rid of their unwanted Jews.

As we see, there are [*is*] both a modern aspect to Zionism, as there is a historical aspect. If the Jews wouldn’t have [*had not*] had a shared sense of history, as being bound based by more than just religion – a religion most of the Zionist pioneers and found fathers otherwise wished to relieve themselves from – they would not have felt this sense of belonging to this certain “imagined community”. The reactions they met, the pogroms and antisemitic events, only revoke shared memories of oppression and hatred, that were all too familiar to the Jews across the known world.

But the idea of becoming a nation, with the insistence on their own state, gathering Jews from all over Europe and beyond, would not have been possible without the “print press” or the preceding cases of nationalist movements.

As such Zionism is a modern phenomenon, but a phenomenon that seems almost universal in its way of expressing the same sentiments any other nation expressed, the wish for the particular imagined community to be sovereign, only made possible by modern developments.

Yet, at the same time Zionism is a reflection and response based on historical ethnic ties and sense of belonging, which would not have been possible, hadn't the Jews have a history based on shared "myth-symbols".

And while it is true that the Zionist pioneers and founding fathers wished to relieve themselves of the religion, the religious traditions of the Jews, as great a part of the "myth-symbols" as they were, stayed a strong part of Zionism, reimagined or not.

So, Zionism seems to be a modern expression of the historical hope of the Jews, to see redemption for the people as a whole, in a sovereign state.



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<http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/nations-nationalism-and-zionism/>

¹ The Damascus Affair of 1840 is one of the long-recognized signposts of modern Jewish history, overshadowed in current memory by the even more dramatic and influential affairs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In brief outline, this affair involved charges of ritual murder by Jews of a Capuchin monk, Father Tomaso, and his servant in Damascus. The first news reports to reach the west were that the Jews charged with the crime had confessed, providing separate investigators with detailed accounts that confirmed one another, leaving no doubt as to the guilt of those charged. Moreover, western observers in Damascus, including the French and English consuls--ostensibly not the kind of men to accept charges of ritual murder lightly--concurred that the evidence was overwhelming and that Jews were guilty beyond a shadow of a doubt.

These reports, as well as the acceptance of them in the west, were the cause of astonishment and profound consternation by Jews in Europe, who had believed that ritual murder trials were a thing of the past, or at least that a belief in them by Europe's educated population was no

longer to be expected. Eventually a different story emerged: The confessions were the result of torture, the corroborating accounts produced by collusion among the investigators. Similarly, it turned out that the information provided so confidently by the French and British consuls was tainted. As the case unraveled, much was revealed about Jewish consciousness at this time. And much, too, was revealed about non-Jewish attitudes to Jews--much of it not pretty.

<http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.php?id=1259>

² In 1894, French army captain Alfred Dreyfus, an Alsatian Jew, was wrongly accused of passing military secrets to the Germans. The ensuing scandal has often been studied for what it reveals about French anti-Semitism and tensions between republicanism and conservatism under the Third Republic. But because treason was considered a cowardly—and therefore effeminate—act, Dreyfus also embodied, for many, the danger of effeminate men masquerading in military uniform.

<https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/content/dreyfus-affair-and-crisis-french-manhood>

