Zionism’s competing visions of Israel

Michael Brenner shows that contemporary debates have precedents in the origins of the movement.

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In Review

In Search of Israel

The History of an Idea

By Michael Brenner
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The creation of the state of Israel 70 years ago this month made the editors of the *Christian Century* uneasy. They were disturbed that Israel's declaration of independence made no mention of God, calling that omission an "ominous portent." At other moments, they expressed dismay at how religion in the new state was tied to nationalistic goals. It seems the editors of 1948 were worried when Israel was not religious and worried when it was.

Israel has never been easy to get one's mind around. For those wishing to try, Michael Brenner offers a lively and elegant guide. His focus is not on the Arab-Israeli conflict but on the conflicts within the Zionist movement itself. The idea of Israel has been contested by Jews since the beginning of the movement, and various ideas of a Jewish homeland have been shaped and reshaped by circumstance. Though Zionism has a straightforward definition—the belief that the Jewish people need a homeland in the region of Palestine—there have been many versions of Zionism. Knowing that history is useful for Christians who want to understand the complexities of Israeli life today and converse with Jewish friends and neighbors, who likely have their own complicated relationship to Israel.

The intellectual history of Zionism has been told before in such valuable works as Arthur Hertzberg's *The Zionist Idea* and Geoffrey Wheatcroft's *The Controversy of Zion*. Brenner, who directs the Center for Israel Studies at American University in Washington, D.C., brings the story into the 21st century and exercises a keen eye for its ironies, ambiguities, and inner tensions. Of these, perhaps most striking is the way Zionism has comprised two seemingly opposing projects.

On the one hand, creating a homeland for the Jews was meant to make the Jews like any other people. Theodor Herzl, the visionary founder of the movement, believed that Jews would always be regarded with suspicion and contempt by the gentile world until they became like any other national group, with their own recognized place to stand on the map. Just as Swedes have Sweden and Albanians have Albania, the Jews needed a place where being Jewish would be as normal as a Swede being Swedish in Sweden. The normalization project is cited in Israel's declaration of independence, which asserts the right of Jews to determine their own destiny and

exercise sovereignty in their own land “like any other people.”

But Zionism was almost always more than that. When imagining a homeland, most every Zionist envisioned not only a place for normal Jewish life but a place that embodied a particular ideal. Since most early Zionists were secular Europeans, their ideals reflected that world. Herzl imagined the Jewish homeland as an urbane replication of Central Europe—a kind of Switzerland of the Middle East. Zionists attached to the labor movement wanted to establish an egalitarian society of workers. Still others looked to the Jewish home as a site for the flourishing of Jewish culture and the Hebrew language, and still others envisioned the creation of a new, vibrant Jewish identity.

Religious Zionists were few in number in the early years of the movement. But because the Jewish national story is intertwined with the Jewish religious story, it was impossible to keep religious tropes out of Zionist rhetoric. Brenner cites the case of David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister. Ben-Gurion had little use for rabbinic Judaism, but he loved the stories and heroes of the Bible. He also believed that the state of Israel had a distinct role in the history of nations: to be an example of democratic and humanitarian values. In that context Ben-Gurion could cite the prophet Isaiah and speak of Israel as “a light to the nations.”

So a Jewish homeland was to be ordinary, but exceptional; secular, but the bearer of a mission of profound universal significance.

Among the several ironies Brenner notes is this: though the Zionist project has in many ways succeeded beyond expectations, the goal of normalcy has remained elusive. Jews have gained not only a homeland but a state with all its modern furnishings; yet for some of its neighbors Israel has never been regarded as normal, and in some quarters is viewed as a pariah. “Normalizing” relations with Israel is precisely what many in the Arab world—including Arabs in Gaza and in the West Bank territory occupied by Israel since 1967—would reject.

For a tiny country, Israel has always attracted outsized attention. Brenner notes that it has been the subject of more United Nations resolutions than any other country. In 1975 the UN passed a resolution branding Zionism a form of racism (it was rescinded in 1991). When Jewish and Israeli leaders complain that outsiders are quicker to condemn Israel than they are other countries on issues of human rights, they echo a long-standing Zionist desire for Jews to be treated “like any other

people.”

Yet Jews themselves are keenly aware that Israel is not like any other nation. That the Jewish people gained a state of their own in their ancient homeland after 2,000 years, and that this state was created in the same decade in which a third of their people were systematically murdered—these facts alone make Israel historically unique. It is also a state whose borders have never been internationally recognized. The Green Line that marked its eastern border in 1967, and which today outlines the western border of a proposed state for Palestinians, is merely the armistice line hastily drawn at the end of the 1949 Arab-Israeli war which followed the declaration of independence. And of course Israel is the only Jewish state in the world. Jews don’t exactly agree on what it means that Israel is a Jewish state, but Israel is the only country where that question matters.

The early Zionists had only tentative ideas about what political shape a homeland would take. Their notions of who their new neighbors might be in Palestine—or how those neighbors might greet the newcomers—were often vague or naive. Some supposed that the Jewish home would have autonomous status (how autonomous was not clear) within some larger entity—perhaps part of the Ottoman Empire, or Greater Syria, or (after World War I) the British Mandate, or a binational Jewish-Arab state. Brenner says that as late as the 1930s it was not assumed that a nation state was the necessary goal of Zionism.

However, for the so-called revisionary Zionists led by Vladimir Jabotinsky, the need for a state was obvious early on. As they saw it, the fate of the Jewish people depended entirely on acquiring the military and political power to establish and safeguard a state. In the event, when independence was declared in 1948, following the UN endorsement of the plan in 1947, it was Jewish military forces, not the UN, that secured it.

The conflicts that shaped the first decades of the Zionist movement are not merely a matter of historical interest; they are closely replicated in 21st-century Israeli politics. Today’s parliamentary debates between Labor and Likud, and between cosmopolitan secularists, democratic socialists, and security hawks, echo Zionist debates begun in the early 20th century.

Since 1967, the debate over what it means to be a Jewish state has been increasingly joined by explicitly religious voices, mostly from two groups. Neither is

large, but they wield leverage in Israel's splintered politics.

One group is the *haredi*, or ultra-Orthodox. At the time of Israel's founding, the number of *haredi* Jews was minuscule, and Israel's secular leaders expected this premodern form of Judaism to dwindle away. Now they constitute 12 percent of the population and are increasing. Because *haredi* generally don't serve in the military or work outside the home or their houses of religious study, and because they make increased demands on government to financially support their families and schools, their growth is of considerable concern to Israelis who pay taxes and send their sons and daughters into the army.

The second group is the nationalistic religious Zionists inspired by Rabbi Abraham Kook and his son, Zvi Yehuda Kook. Abraham Kook made the innovative theological move of aligning the secular project of Zionism with the religious identity of the Jewish people.

Until Kook emerged in the 1920s, there had been two main religious views of Zionism. One followed the traditional rabbinic teaching that Jews would return to their homeland only at the coming of the messianic age. In that view, Zionism was a blasphemous attempt by nonobservant Jews to do what should be left up God. A second group of religious Jews did endorse Zionism, but on pragmatic, not religious grounds. For these leaders, a Jewish homeland was not a theological project, but it was nevertheless a legitimate practical goal for the Jewish people.

Kook, by contrast, contended that through the attachment to the land of Israel, God was leading Jews toward a greater adherence to Torah and the realization of their religious destiny. In his account, the nonobservant Jews and even the anti-religious Jews who founded and defended the state were unknowingly serving a religious end.

Israel's 1967 victory in the Six-Day War, with its unexpected capture of land from Egypt, Syria, and Jordan—for a time more than doubling the size of its territory—instilled new fervor in Kook's followers. The expansion of the land of Israel seemed divine confirmation of his vision of renewal. Religious Zionists of the Kook school spearheaded the settlement of the West Bank, viewing the occupation of the ancient Jewish lands of Judea and Samaria as a religious duty.

Like the *haredi*, the national religious Jews constitute only about a fifth of the Jewish population; like the *haredi*, their religious vision is not shared by most Israeli Jews. Yet both groups have had political clout as part of the center-right coalitions formed

by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

When Herzl first presented his idea for a Jewish homeland in the 1890s, it was greeted with much derision by the Jews of Western Europe, most of whom had no desire to reinvent their lives in a Middle Eastern desert. They spoke French, German, or English, thought of themselves as French, German, or English, and regarded France, Germany, or England as their home. Europe was where their future lay, they thought, and Herzl's scheme seemed deluded.

But Herzl thought the Jews who believed they would eventually be accepted in Europe were the deluded ones. However much Jews might try to fit into European societies, he wrote, they would always be shackled by persecution and suspicion. That debate was put to rest by the Holocaust: Hitler proved that Herzl was right all along.

Yet today, 70 years after the founding, debates about the role of the state of Israel in Jewish life have not gone away. Brenner notes a phenomenon that would have seemed unthinkable in the years immediately after World War II: Jews leaving Israel to make a home abroad, including in the cities of Europe, and even in Berlin. More Israelis than ever before—some half a million—live outside Israel. The notion that only in Israel can Jews lead a fully Jewish life is contested in new ways by diaspora Jews, both religious and secular.

The rise of the state of Israel was designed to give Jews a secure existence. This goal came to mean in practice the preservation of a Jewish-majority state. Based on its founding documents, Israel is also committed to guaranteeing the equal rights of non-Jews living within the state—which is 20 percent of the population, primarily Arab Muslims, Arab Christians, and Druze. To be both Jewish and democratic is the state's official aspiration. That combined goal presents a challenge: Is the state to be as Jewish as democracy allows, or as democratic as Jewishness allows? And Jewish in what way? These are questions pursued regularly in Israeli streets, politics, and courts.

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The challenge of being Jewish and democratic assumed another dimension after Israel's occupation of the West Bank. In capturing the territory in the Six-Day War, Israel gained a security buffer but also a new threat to its identity. It controls over 2 million Palestinian Arabs on the West Bank, former citizens of Jordan, who for 50

years have lived without rights of citizenship in Israel or any other state.

For most Israelis, any conceivable effort to create an autonomous state for Palestinians on the West Bank presents an unacceptable security risk. At the same time, to incorporate Arab residents of the West Bank as citizens of Israel would unravel the whole idea of there being a majority Jewish state in which being Jewish is the norm. Meanwhile, the occupation goes on, humiliating and oppressive for Palestinians, morally degrading to those who impose it. The situation is unacceptable to most Israeli Jews, yet the options on offer appear to them even less acceptable.

The political and moral hazards of Israel's situation have led some Jews to wonder if the Zionist project was misguided. Perhaps political sovereignty was never a proper goal, or perhaps it is no longer. Brenner notes the rise of a lively post-Zionist literature inside and outside Israel, produced by writers for whom diaspora, not homeland, is the authentic context for Jewish life. Perhaps normality for Jews means something other than it did decades ago. "In the eyes of many," writes Brenner, "it is precisely the diaspora, which once looked so 'abnormal,' that makes the Jews seem more 'normal' today, while the nation state has, at least in the eyes of some observers, an anachronistic ring to it." But such a claim would be bitterly rejected by other Jews, especially in Israel, who understand their fate and that of the Jewish people to be bound up with that of the modern state. Here again, as Brenner shows, the contemporary debates have precedents in the beginnings of Zionism.

Brenner ends by citing a much-discussed 2015 speech by Israel's president Reuven Rivlin in which he acknowledged the increasingly fractured nature of Israeli society. Rivlin identified four distinct sectors of the population: secular Jews, national religious Jews, *haredi* Jews, and Arabs (both Muslim and Christian). None of these groups can claim to be the majority; all tend to live in self-contained worlds. Of these groups, Rivlin noted, the Arabs and *haredi* are the fastest growing, and it's possible these two groups will in the near future together constitute close to half the population. That would be a dizzying development, given that neither of these groups was part of the original Zionist project: Israeli Arabs of course have never been invested in the state being Jewish; the *haredi* historically have not been invested in the Jews having a state.

Israel remains a hard place to get your mind around with its mix of religious and secular identities, European and Middle Eastern politics, Arab, Christian, and Jewish

traditions, pressed together in a compact space in a volatile region. In pondering the state of Israel, I sometimes try to envision a roughly comparable scenario for Christians. What if Christians had been a small, persecuted group, scattered throughout the nations, who had never had the chance to create a majority Christian state? Imagine too that for the first time Christians had the chance to create a state somewhere in the Middle East—a land, let us suppose, that already had indigenous residents. This state would—to continue the thought experiment—be a gathering of races, ethnicities, and national traditions, with some Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Anabaptists, and Pentecostals, along with assorted traditionalists and radicals, socialists and capitalists, secularists and fervent believers, premodernists and postmodernists.

Would such a group of Christians be able to agree on a minimal definition of *Christian*? What kind of witness would such a state make to the nations and its own citizens?

Such a country would be defined in large part by rich and rancorous debates over the nature and purpose of its own existence. In that light, and with some imagination and historical knowledge, Christians can understand something of the Jewish search for Israel, and why the search continues.

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