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The Unraveling of Zionism?

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5/23/2016

Ideological movements, be they religious or secular, are demanding and Procrustean movements. By ideological movements I mean those that demand of their adherents resolute belief in some “deep set of truths” posited by a deity, by supposed immutable historical laws, or by some other equally unchallengeable source. Their followers, once initiated, or even just born into the fold, are expected to stay there and, as the saying goes, “keep the faith.”

However, in cultural, political and religious terms there are no eternal deep truths. History has an abrasive quality that erodes our beliefs in this god and that law. Though the process might take a longer or shorter time to manifest itself, yesterday’s faith will at some point start to ring less true. At some point followers start to fall away.

What happens when ideologically driven leaders start to lose their following? Well, they get very upset because those who are supposed to affirm everything the movement stands for are now having doubts. Such doubters are dangerous to the supposed true faith and so are usually dealt with in one of two ways: (1) the ideologues in charge attempt to marginalize the disaffected by denigrating them and then casting them out of the fold or (2) if we are dealing with totalitarian types, they send the dissenters off to a gulag, or worse.

This sort of unraveling – the loss of growing numbers of traditional followers of an ideological movement – seems to be going on within the Zionist community, particularly among American Jews. Zionism is an ideological movement that preaches the God-given Jewish right to control and settle all of historical Palestine. Since the founding of Israel in 1948 the Zionists have also claimed that the “Jewish State” represents all of world Jewry, thus self-aware Jews owe allegiance to both Israel and its prevailing Zionist philosophy. However, in the last ten or so years that allegiance has been breaking down. In the U.S. a growing “disconnect” has been noted between the outlook and actions of the ideologically rigid leaders of major U.S. Jewish organizations (who remain uncritically supportive of Israel) and the increasingly alienated Jewish American rank and file whom, at least up until recently, the leaders claimed to represent. This gap has been repeatedly documented by several sources ranging from, Pew Research Center surveys, to the Jewish Forward newspaper, and the organization of Reform Judaism.

As characterized by the *Jewish Forward* the situation is that ordinary American Jews are “far more critical of Israel than the Jewish establishment.” Almost half of the American Jews surveyed by a Pew study in 2013 did not think the Israeli government was making a “sincere effort” to achieve peace with the Palestinians. Almost as many saw Israel’s expanding colonization of the West Bank as counterproductive. Thus, this disconnect is not a sudden or new situation. The numbers of questioning American Jews have continued to grow, and things have only gotten worse for the Zionist leadership. Indeed, just as many young American Jews may be joining pro-peace activist groups as are cheering on AIPAC at its conventions.

Leadership Reactions in the U.S.

Following the two-option scheme described above, the main reaction of the leadership of American Jewish organizations is to try to marginalize these questioning Jews – to dismiss them as “uninformed, unengaged, or wrong.” To that end American Jewish officials are now conveniently asking if they really need to represent “the disorganized, unaffiliated Jewish community ... the 50% of Jews who, in a calendar year, do not step into a synagogue, do not belong to a JCC [Jewish Community Center], and are Jews in name only.”

This sort of marginalizing of all but the true believers was articulated by Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League. He told the *Jewish Forward*, “you know who the Jewish establishment represents? Those who care.” Here Foxman was engaging in a bit of circular thinking: the important constituency are those represented by the establishment. How do we know? They are the ones who still “care” about Israel. How do we define caring? Caring means continuing to believe what the Jewish establishment and the Israeli government tell them. Eventually Foxman goes even further, concluding that Jewish leaders aren’t beholden to the opinions of any aspect of the Jewish public. “I don’t sit and poll my constituency,” Foxman said. “Part of Jewish leadership is leadership. We lead.” It would appear that, over time, he is leading diminishing numbers.

Leadership Reactions in Israel

Reaction out of Israel to reports of the growing alienation of American Jews has been aggressively negative. After all, Israel is the centerpiece of Zionist ideology – its grand achievement. Being the subject of criticism by growing numbers of Jews, in the U.S. or elsewhere, is utterly unacceptable to those now in charge of Israel’s ruling institutions.

These leaders, both secular and religious, have begun to write off critical and skeptical Jews as apostates, even to the point of denying that they are Jews at all. Seymour Reich, who is a former chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations (such folks always wait till they retire to speak out critically), has recently described Israel’s current leadership as alarmingly anti-democratic. He writes of “the Israeli government’s assault on democratic values” and its use of “legislation and incitement to strike down dissent,” be it expressed through “speech, press, religion [or] academic freedoms.” He goes on to quote the Israeli Minister of Religious Affairs, David Azoulay. “Speaking about Reform and Conservative Jews,” who happen to make up the majority of Jews in the U.S., are often of liberal persuasion, and increasingly alienated by the ultraorthodox policies of Israel’s religious establishment, Azoulay said, “I cannot allow myself to call such a person a Jew,” and, “We cannot allow these groups to get near the Torah of Israel.” Things appear potentially even worse when we hear Israel’s Intelligence Minister Israel Katz calling for the “targeted killing” of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) leaders. In the U.S. many of these leaders are Jewish.

Such official Israeli attitudes make a mockery of the claims of American politicians, such as Hillary Clinton, that Israel “is built on principles of equality, tolerance and pluralism. ... And we marvel that such a bastion of liberty exists in a region so plagued by intolerance.” It should be noted that in January 2016 the Israeli Knesset rejected a bill that would have secured in law equality for all the country’s citizens.

In truth, Zionism and the state it created have always been ideologically rigid. Every effort at modifying the movement’s basic demand for a state exclusive to one people, from early concepts of “cultural Zionism” to more recent notions of “liberal Zionism,” has failed. The occasional bit of propagandistic dissimulation notwithstanding, Zionist leaders from Ben Gurion to Netanyahu have been dedicated to (a) territorial expansion based on the principle of Eretz Israel (greater Israel) and (b) the principle of inequality – none of them have ever seriously considered equal social and economic, much less political, treatment for non-Jews. That means that the present, obnoxiously rigid hardliners both in the U.S. and Israel are pushing persistent racist and colonialist themes.

It is the persistence of these Zionist themes that has led to increasing skepticism among U.S. Jews, most of whom take the ideals of democracy seriously. And it is the ideologically rigid refusal to reach a just peace with the Palestinians, who 67 years after the triumph of Zionism are still being ethnically cleansed, that has pushed many otherwise passive Jews into open opposition.

It has taken us several generations to get to this point, but our arrival has been predictable all along. That is because the ideology of Zionism brooks no compromises and admits to no sins – even as Israeli behavior grows evermore barbaric. Thus, the number of dissenters and critics

grow and the ideologues start to become anxious and vengeful – a display of aggression that only alienates more Jews. Thus it is that Zionism has begun to unravel.