

Zionism as Liberation Theology

An Exploration of the Roots of Zionism and its Goals



From Holocaust to Resurrection

Statue Park, Karmiel Israel

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Don Jacobson

August 2026

בְּאֵין חֶזוֹן יִפְרָע עָם (משלי כט:יח)

For lack of vision a people become undone (*Proverbs 29:18*)

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Introduction

In its broadest sense, Zionism is a movement of national liberation – emancipation of the Jewish people from the bonds of long-suffering exile.

Zionism is the driving force behind the establishment of the State of Israel, which is now facing its most serious crisis since the Yom Kippur War. In some ways, the current struggle is more serious than any that have come before because it is comprised of a combination of existential physical threats from without and a deepening communal and moral crisis from within that is rending Israel's frayed social fabric.

I am drafting this essay in an attempt to find common ground among those who consider themselves to be Zionists (both inside and outside of Israel) and to remind those who have chosen to throw in their lot with the State of Israel why they are here and why they have chosen to stay. In so doing, I hope to bring the goals of Zionism into focus in a manner that will contribute to and serve as a basis for discussion about the future of Zionism and the State of Israel.

As an unapologetic proponent of Zionism, I will try to engage some of its critics – both inside and outside of the Jewish world – and will also try to bridge gaps between religious and secular viewpoints. In attempting to reach the widest possible audience, I will of necessity need to use terms that some in the religious community might find offensive. For example, in the religious community, some may be offended by the way in which I reference the God of Israel in writing. On the other hand, some in the secular community may even reject the very notion of the existence of God. Such objections are to be expected and are, perhaps, unavoidable. My intent is not to offend or drive anyone away, and I hope that readers will persevere through the end of the essay despite any such missteps, affronts or errors in terminology that they may find objectionable.¹

¹ Note also that the numerous footnotes in this essay, some of which include references to Wikipedia and other non-academic sources, are primarily intended to provide readers with additional background for each subject and avenues for further personal research.

Finally, while theologically-based anti-Zionism among Jews is welcome (and even necessary) in Judaism's democratic tradition, I hope to also show that such criticism is misplaced. I believe that Zionism – as an extension of Judaism – seeks the redemption of the Jewish people in particular and, ultimately, the liberation of all humankind. As such, I will investigate whether Zionism is a form of *liberation theology*. In so doing, I will describe liberation theology as it is classically defined and discuss some of the differences between theology and ideology and the fine line between them and idolatry. I will also propose three levels or phases of Zionism, offer a Jewish definition of liberation as its ultimate goal, and the connection between this goal and the theophany (mass revelation) at Sinai that lies at the heart of Jewish belief and practice.

Liberation theology and Zionism

What is classical liberation theology?

Liberation theology is a religious and social movement that arose in the mid- to late-20th century in Latin America. Led by Roman Catholic theologians, it emphasizes the liberation of oppressed peoples from the inequities of existing socioeconomic structures. One of its leading proponents is Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian priest.²



Peruvian Priest Gustavo Gutierrez

Gutiérrez has written that “true liberation” has three main dimensions: 1) political and social liberation, meaning the elimination of the causes of poverty and injustice; 2) emancipation of the poor and the oppressed from all “those things that limit their capacity to develop themselves freely and in dignity”; and 3) liberation from selfishness and sin and re-establishment of a relationship with God and with other people.³

Liberation theology has been particularly popular among Catholics in Latin America, although variations of liberation theology have also been adopted in other parts of the world such as Black liberation theology in the United States, Palestinian liberation theology, and Irish liberation with respect to Northern Ireland. In Latin America, liberation theology emphasizes the Marxist idea of class struggle and institutionalized sin. In doing so, Latin American liberation theologians have also come into conflict with the Catholic Church itself.⁴

What is Zionism?

The yearning for a return to the Land of Israel constitutes one of the theological underpinnings of Judaism, beginning from the Babylonian Exile following the destruction of the First Temple in the Sixth Century BCE⁵ and afterward following the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70 CE. The Bar Kochba Revolt (which began in 132 CE and

Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theory of Liberation*, 1971

³ Liberation Theology Resources website
<https://liberationtheology.org/people-organizations/gustavo-gutierrez/>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology

⁵ BCE = Before the Common Era and CE = Common Era, exactly parallel to the terms BC and AD, respectively.

was suppressed by the Romans in 135 CE) and the expulsions that followed effectively ended Jewish self-government in the Land of Israel until the founding of the State of Israel, although a significant Jewish presence and culture remained until the Arab conquests beginning from the 7th century CE.⁶ Even thereafter, small persecuted Jewish communities survived on the land throughout the centuries, including during the period of Crusader rule.⁷

As a modern historical movement, Zionism arose in the 19th century among Jews in Europe who believed that the persecution of the Jews in the Diaspora could be solved by a return to the homeland of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel.



Destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem - Francesco Hayez, 1867



The focus on the Land of Israel is so heavily ingrained in Jewish culture and liturgy that even the *Halutzim* (the early Zionist pioneers), who were radically socialist and anti-religious, found inspiration from the Biblical prophets. Despite their roots in Jewish tradition and society, they

had to overcome the resistance of established Jewish institutions – both religious and nonreligious – in their home countries as well as the hardships of reclaiming the land, first in what was at the time an undeveloped backwater of the Ottoman Empire⁸ and later under the British Mandate.⁹

⁶ Jewish diaspora.

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_diaspora#:~:text=The%20Jewish%20diaspora%20in%20the,business%2C%20commerce%2C%20and%20agriculture

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_and_Judaism_in_the_Land_of_Israel

⁸ For those who doubt the harshness of the land and the condition of its inhabitants prior to the arrival of the Halutzim, see the accounts of Mark Twain in Chapter 56 of his work **Innocents Abroad** (1869). <https://twain.lib.virginia.edu/innocent/text/inn56.html>

⁹ The British Mandate from the League of Nations began in 1917 following the defeat of the Turks in World War I and ended 1947 when Great Britain referred the Mandate to the newly-formed United Nations.

Is Zionism theology or ideology?

Given the above, and although Jewish sovereignty ended about 1800 years earlier, the presence of Jews on the land never ended and the connection of Diaspora Jews with the land was never completely severed (more about this later). The Jewish belief in Zion as a place of ultimate redemption appears frequently in Jewish liturgy. Zion as a place of refuge and redemption has also found its way into popular Western culture.¹⁰

Nevertheless, because of its response to Islamist terrorism and threats of annihilation, the State of Israel is today being accused by its enemies of being a *settler colonial ideology* that seeks the liquidation of the Palestinians, akin even to Nazism and similarly despised ideologies. This essay is not directed toward the current military and political conflict, but is rather intended to explore the nature of Zionism and its theological and ideological basis. However, readers can draw their own conclusions about such claims based in part on the contents of this essay.

In order to shed light on the question of whether Zionism is theology or ideology, the following is an admittedly non-exhaustive compilation of sources that compares a variety of characteristics of both in an attempt to distinguish between them.

Theology	Ideology
The Middle Ages established theology as the “queen of sciences” because it links faith and reason¹¹	The French philosopher de Tracy first used the term “ideology” to describe his “ science of ideas ” ¹²
Primary focus on the individual¹³	Primary focus on society Ideology as a “secular religion” that can supplement or replace religion, which defines group identity and acts as “ cultural software ” ¹⁴
Belief in another world¹⁵ The belief that reality extends beyond the confines of sensory experience	Belief only in this world Emphasizes reason, rationality, and sensory experience

¹⁰ Examples include the way in which Zion is referenced in the work of Bob Marley and, more recently, in the Matrix movie trilogy.

¹¹ Joel Satterly, *Educational Foundation: Ideology or Theology*
<https://institute4c.org/educational-foundation-ideology-or-theology/>

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antoine_Destutt_de_Tracy

¹³ Steven Yearwood, *The Difference between Ideology and Theology?*
<https://sdyarwood.medium.com/the-difference-between-ideology-and-theology-bc8cf2a2b10f>

¹⁴ Note that I use the term “cultural software” in a different context below.

¹⁵ Fr. Dwight Longenecker, *Theology or Ideology?*
<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/standingonmyhead/2014/05/theology-or-ideology.html>

Theology	Ideology
Religion seeks to provide a complete cosmology or explanation of the meaning of life ¹⁶ Most religions consider themselves to be universal approaches to life	Posits ideas that form the basis of a specific economic or political theory While no ideology purports to provide a complete explanation of the universe, each ideology emphasizes a single overriding value by which all other values are measured . ¹⁷
Political theology is a worldview that calls for and expects divine intervention ¹⁸	Political ideology is concerned with power relationships between and among people

It should also be noted that theology itself is a product of Greek and Christian tradition and was foreign to rabbinic tradition well into the 12th Century CE, when Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides)¹⁹ began to surreptitiously incorporate Greek philosophy into his work.²⁰

According to the above definitions, even what is termed as classical liberation theology as developed in Latin America is not theology. Although it originated largely from members of the Church itself and is based on the teachings of the New Testament, which gives it a patina of religious authority, it would be more appropriately categorized as an ideology since it principally adopts Marxist/socialist political ideology of class struggle.

Is Zionism a form of liberation theology?

Like the Marxists of Latin American liberation theology, the early Zionist pioneers also espoused a form of socialist ideology but, unlike the classical liberation theologians, they had a strong anti-religious outlook. Moreover, even during its early phases, and before the founding of the state, the Zionist enterprise was able to assimilate a wide range of political and religious ideologies – right, left and center – and attract Jews from both Western and later from Eastern (primarily Arabic-speaking) countries precisely because it arose organically from its roots in historic Jewish belief and practice.

¹⁶ *Is there a difference between ideology and religion, and if not, what does secularism achieve?*
<https://philosophy.stackexchange.com/questions/46431/is-there-a-difference-between-ideology-and-religion-and-if-not-what-does-secu>

¹⁷ Communism, for example, describes a system of collective economic and social arrangements but does not purport to explain how life began. It can, however, provide a framework in which the purpose of life may eventually be discovered scientifically (such as Darwinism).

¹⁸ Charles P. Henry, *Delivering Daniel: The Dialectic of Ideology and Theology in the Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr.*
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2784219>

¹⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maimonides>

²⁰ Comments of Rabbi Dr. Avi Kadish, September 30, 2024.

Thus, while the primary focus of early Zionism was ideological in its secular belief in the primacy of **this world**, and in rationality, sensory experience and socialism, Zionism has also been able to incorporate a wide range of economic and social rationales (including liberal capitalism) as well as religious beliefs that focus on the individual, while seeking to provide a full cosmology of life and even belief in divine intervention – including both Jewish and non-Jewish messianism.

Given the above and the historical context in which it developed, and having features of both, Zionism is not easily categorized as either theology or ideology. Can it be classified as both, or is it something else entirely? In order to clarify this question, we need to better define Zionism and what we mean by liberation. But first, we need to explore Zionism through its roots in Jewish belief and philosophy.

[The fine line between theology or ideology and idolatry](#)

Any discussion of the ideological or theological basis of Zionism also needs to take into account a fundamental tenet of Judaism expressed in the second commandment:

You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth.

You shall not bow down to them or serve them. (Exodus 20:4-5)

The importance to Jewish belief of the commandment proscribing idolatry cannot be overstated. In Rambam's list of the 613 commandment in his *Mishneh Torah*, 18 negative commandment and 3 positive commandments relate directly to idol worship and idolatrous customs and practices. These commandments are repeated at least 28 times more in one form or another in the Five Books of Moses alone.

Judaism can thus be defined by its active opposition to idolatry in all its forms.²¹ We tend to think of idolatry in terms of its physical



manifestations such as statues, amulets and totems, or in terms of belief in superstitions or astrology, but there is no lack of examples of idolatrous behavior in modern life. As proposed by Prof. Asa Kasher of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, anything in the world that has overriding importance in a



²¹ Prof. Asa Kasher, [Judaism and Idolatry](#), 2004 (in Hebrew) p. 27.

person's life, when taken to its extreme, may fall under the definition of an idol for that person. When taken in moderation, the drive for money, fame, power or sex can have positive personal and social benefits. However, when taken to extremes, without regard for competing and no less important values, such behavior enters the realm of idolatry. The negation of idolatry – active opposition to all forms of idolatry – is thus, according to Prof. Kasher, key to understanding Judaism and – by inference – Zionism.

Numerous beliefs and practices – both religious and secular – have the potential to become idolatrous when taken to their extreme, whether in the social, political or personal realms. The following are but a few examples in Israeli society today,

Halacha as idolatry

One example in Jewish practice itself is the treatment of so-called 'chained women' (*agunot*). Jewish law (*Halacha*) requires that the approval of a wife's request for divorce



must be obtained from the husband (including in cases of severe abuse). In cases where the husband has disappeared (whether willingly or by circumstance), the woman must prove that such disappearance is permanent, all without any statute of limitations. This clearly discriminatory attitude against women, which is canonized in Jewish law, frequently causes long-term and sometimes lifelong distress to the women themselves and their children, even when the motivations for a husband's refusal to grant a divorce are clearly unjustified or when the chances of 'reappearance' of the lost husband are clearly remote or non-existent. Nevertheless, the deciders in these matters (who are always men) cling to archaic

halachic rulings, placing such rulings above the demand for justice and fairness required in each case and the need for simple compassion and mercy.

In the same vein, take the example of a righteous convert who has undergone the entire conversion process in accordance with all *halachic* rules, but whose conversion is not recognized by a clerk in the Population Registry Office because it was performed by a

religious court from a stream of Judaism that is out of political favor, or whose conversion is subsequently nullified due to the convert's failure to strictly observe all halachic laws.

In both of the above examples, due to the rigidity (or perhaps cowardice) of those interpreting Jewish law, the law itself becomes a form of idolatry that elevates it above all other considerations of justice, fairness and compassion. Halacha, as an ideal set of rules that developed primarily to enable the Jewish people to survive in Exile by governing the behavior of Jewish individuals and communities, thus becomes an idol *in such cases*.

At what point does extreme ideological purity defeat the very purpose for which its rules were developed? The Orthodox religious establishment has held a monopoly on matters of personal status in Israel since its founding. Yet as much as 85% of Jews living in the Diaspora and approximately two-thirds of all Jews within Israel do not live by the strict requirements of Halacha as interpreted by the Orthodox establishment. When will those exercising such power recognize that they have failed in their primary mission, which should be to impart moral teachings and to constitute a personal example to other members of society? In trying to force its strictures on the vast majority of Israeli Jews, the religious establishment has failed to teach the law (and in many cases to practice it for that matter). By so doing, they have driven many away from religious observance and practice and have helped create a society in which the vast majority of Israeli Jews scorn traditional Judaism and are ignorant of Jewish law and history. Thus, **the beauty of holiness** is continually tarnished by the ugliness of the exercise of political power by the Rabbinate and religious political parties. In prioritizing power and budgets over ethical considerations, and in choosing coercion over persuasion, such behavior has led generations of Israeli Jews to despise those practicing orthodoxy and the practice of Judaism itself, thereby **desecrating the name of God** in the process. Would Abraham smash such symbols of idolatry if he were alive today?

The Land of Israel as idolatry

Many Zionists, both secular and religious, view the Land of Israel itself as sacred, each in their own way. Indeed, for religious Jews, such belief springs from scripture itself, a sentiment that is shared by other peoples and religions, even if such systems of belief lead to **polar opposite conclusions** about its ownership and possession. However, in Jewish belief, and indeed in Jewish scripture, the land is not owned by the People of Israel, but rather by God, and **residency on the land, and its possession, is given conditionally**

and is not absolute.²² In Judaism, such possession depends on the observance of certain laws, such as *shmita* (allowing the land to lay fallow every seven years), but also on good behavior, such as the commandment to not oppress the stranger.²³

In practical terms, however, possession of the land has profound implications for the system of justice, the rights and freedoms of individuals, cultural development and expressions of national self-determination that take place there. **The conflict over the land is** not merely a question of which people will rule here – it is, **in essence, a conflict of values.** Defining the scope of such a conflict of values is beyond the scope of this essay, but suffice it to say that, on the international level at least, a



sharp contrast must be drawn between a vision of society based on the primacy of law in which individuals can freely express themselves and associate, and a vision of society in which the individual is subject to the tyranny of a fear-based ideology and the whims of a ruling clique that arrogates all power to itself.

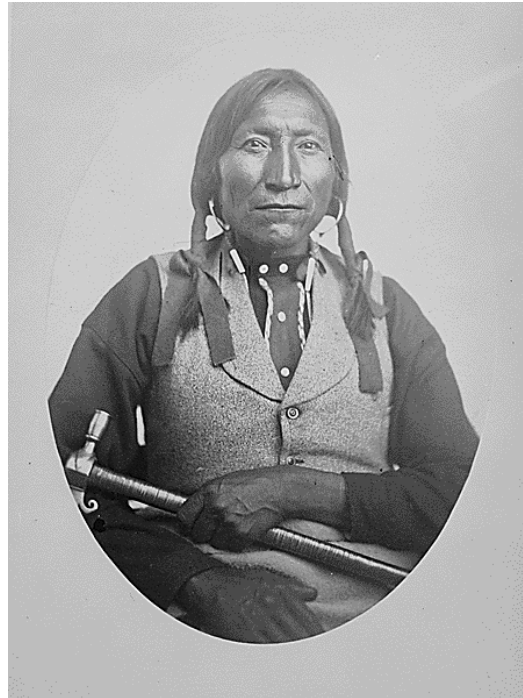
In any case, the **conceit of ownership** of the land enters the realm of idolatry when it is elevated as a supreme value over other considerations – when justice is perverted by personal or political interests, when the rights of individuals are subordinated to those of the state without recourse, when only “official” cultural development is allowed or when extermination of its adversaries and competitors is determined to be in the national interest by those holding political power.

It always astounds me how those who most fervently proclaim their love for the land, who cry out for its holiness and are willing to shed their own blood and the blood of others for its control, nevertheless care nothing for preserving its landscape and wildlife, hand over environmentally sensitive public lands to private interests for profit, block efforts to prevent

²² Moreover, the precise boundaries given in the various sources are uncertain (see below).

²³ Leviticus 19:33 : *When strangers reside with you in your land, you shall not wrong them.*

its pollution, and poison its air, soil and water with their waste and trash. Perhaps a better way of looking at ownership would be to adopt the attitude taken by many indigenous peoples in various parts of the world, one wherein we say that ‘*We belong to the land*’ rather than the opposite²⁴ or the American Indian proverb that: “***We don’t inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.***”²⁵ Nevertheless, no matter what our attitude is toward the Land of Israel and the Earth, the land will not know rest until we practice the values of justice and stewardship on it in proper balance between our needs and those of future generations.



Left-Right polarization as idolatry

One of the features of current political discourse in Israel (as well as in other countries) is the widening gulf between those who define themselves (or who are defined by others) as leftist or rightist. In this paradigm, the Israeli left is defined as in favor of governmental intervention in the economy and society, as raising the flag of human rights, women’s rights and gay rights, as being for a two-state solution for settling the Palestinian question, and as being generally secular in outlook, if not downright anti-religious. Similarly, and inversely, the right is identified as being *laissez faire* in economic and societal outlook, as placing the rights of Jews above others and as against attacks on traditional family values, as being opposed to the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel and, in general, as being traditional, if not zealous, in religious belief and observance.

As you read this description of these typologies of right and left, you will identify them (but not necessarily identify with them), as most people do. However, few of us fit neatly into one or the other of such typologies. In reality, most people are comprised of a complex mix of character traits and beliefs. Someone who supports transgender rights may also be

²⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elias_Chacour

²⁵ <https://www.firstnations.org/news/every-day-is-earth-day-join-us-in-calling-for-native-led-solutions-to-climate-change/#:~:text=The%20term%20acknowledges%20the%20special,borrow%20it%20from%20our%20children.%E2%80%9D>

against the two-state solution. Another person who strictly adheres to religious law may also be a member of a kibbutz.

As many studies have shown, the way in which we perceive events and other people is strongly colored by our backgrounds – our nation, our tribe and our family – and that we tend to associate with people and groups – and vote – consistently in a manner that reinforces our biases. That's all right and to be expected. Few of us change our basic outlook throughout our lives.

However, when we get carried away by our perceptions and get lost in the illusion that these caricatures represent reality, we enter the realm of idolatry. Holding tightly to our left-leaning or right-leaning biases in



the face of evidence to the contrary is a sure sign that we have slipped over the line. The above typologies, which are often reinforced by the most demonstrative adherents of these positions, run the risk of creating caricatures of us all, and thus of making us lose our humanity. **We have been warned.**

*Be careful, then, to do as the Lord your God has commanded you. **Do not turn aside to the right or to the left:** Follow only the path that the Lord your God has enjoined upon you, so that you may live and that it may go well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land you are to possess.*
(Deuteronomy 5:29-30)

Peace Now as idolatry

The desire for peace is such a basic feature of the human psyche that it should hardly bear mentioning as a form of political idolatry. Such a desire for peace is declared and repeated frequently in Jewish prayerbooks and from every pulpit. Indeed, Israel's Declaration of Independence cites the desire for peace and good neighborliness as one of the country's founding principles.²⁶ Enormous efforts have been made over the years to develop friendly

²⁶ <https://main.knesset.gov.il/en/about/pages/declaration.aspx>

relations, both within Israel and between the State of Israel and the Arab world and the peoples of the world at all levels – from joint schools and social activities through business development, joint security arrangements and diplomatic relations.

Nevertheless, as so bluntly demonstrated by the events of October 7th and its aftermath, rejectionism of any form of co-existence – even of the personal efforts of members of kibbutzim near the Gaza Strip who worked for many years to develop good relations with its inhabitants – continues to be a strong and malignant strain among many in Muslim Arab society and, indeed, as we have seen, has metastasized throughout many parts of the Islamic world and beyond. Many in the so-called ‘peace camp’, both inside and outside of Israel, cite the wrongs and mistakes of Israel as a primary, and oftentimes **the critical factor** that has created the current state of affairs, and as the fault of Israel’s policies and actions. Some call for the imposition of sanctions and the arrest of Israeli political and military leaders, even going so far as calling for the dismantling of the state itself.²⁷ **Virulent antisemitism and anti-Israel rhetoric** that demonizes Jews and Israel for every imaginable crime **is a sickness** that reflects an internal emptiness that can only be satisfied by placing the blame elsewhere. No one, and certainly no country, is ever totally blameless, especially in the framework of war. Nevertheless, blindness in the name of peace, whether inadvertent or willful, to **the declared willingness (and partial success) of the ‘rejectionist camp’ to annihilate the State of Israel, in particular, and Jews in general, is itself a form of idolatry.**

Can two states live side-by-side, where the aim of one is the annihilation of the other? Can a state built on principles of trust and goodwill toward its neighbors long survive next to a state based on principles of subjugation and terror, both of its neighbors and its own people? The ideal of peace among peoples, indeed good neighborliness, can never be achieved at the expense of national suicide.

²⁷ On Jewish anti-Zionism in general, see the analogy made by Natasha Hausdorff in the Munk debate held on June 17, 2024:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BwxFiWieMrE&t=186s&ab_channel=UKLFICharitableTrust

Zionism as idolatry

Zionists, both secular and religious, must also avoid the trap of idolatry. Zionism that elevates Jews (or particular types of Jews) to a superior status and views and treats other human beings as less than human by refusing to recognize the image of God in the other, that elevates possession of land to the sacred without regard for other values that sanctify and preserve life, and that pollutes the land, the seas and rivers, and the air can no longer claim to represent Jewish values and undercuts its own claims of possession and righteousness. Such zealotry is itself a form of idolatry.



Bar Kochba (1927), Arthur Szyk (1894-1951)

Indeed, any ideology or theology, including Zionism, when taken to its extreme may be considered to be a form of idolatry. While zealotry is not in itself idolatrous, **zealotry as a political force** in Judaism has historically proven to be disastrous. And, as such, any ideology or theology of liberation must, in the context of Jewish belief, eschew extremism and promote freedom from the shackles of dogma and idol worship.

The Three Phases or Levels of Zionism

Having presented cultural and historical aspects of the philosophies of liberation theology and Zionism, and the way by which the negation of idolatry is a central component of Jewish belief, I now turn to a survey of the development of Zionism.

Here I propose that Zionism is comprised of three principal levels or phases. Actualization of each succeeding phase depends upon the continuing viability of each preceding phase and builds upon it. While this theoretical construct can provide us with a handy frame of reference for understanding historical processes, each phase or level should be understood as being temporally open-ended – no ‘ideal’ condition or eschatological end-of-days is intended and none should be inferred.

Phase I: Refuge and Defense

The first and most commonly understood level of Zionism today is that the State of Israel constitutes a place of refuge for the Jewish people²⁸, which has been persecuted throughout history and throughout the world. Thus, the original impetus for the first *aliyot* (waves of immigration) to the Land of Israel in the 19th century was to escape the pogroms and persecution suffered by Jews in Europe over the millennia, and which continued unabated and with increasing severity, reaching their peak in the mid 20th century.



As a result, support for the idea of a homeland gained traction among many Jews at that time, both due to such persecution and to the ancient connection of the Jewish people with the land. It should be noted that the idea of the need for a place of refuge did not lead all Jews to the conclusion that it should be in Palestine. Most famously, part of Uganda (today part

²⁸ This was not always the case. One of the earliest and sharpest controversies in Zionist thought centered around the dispute between Theodor Herzl and Ahad Ha'am at the beginning of the 20th century. The former espoused a form of political Zionism, the latter a form of spiritual Zionism. While the political Zionism of Herzl won out in this early contest, the Pioneers were also engaged in cultural and spiritual development from the earliest stages of pre-state settlement. The development of cultural Zionism is described in Phase II.
See for example: <https://www.anumuseum.org.il/blog/herzl-ahad-haam/>

of Kenya) was proffered by the British as an alternative early in the twentieth century. However, this idea and others were ultimately rejected.²⁹

Settlement and defense

In this first phase, characterized primarily by agricultural settlement and land reclamation, the early pioneers acquired lands and developed small agricultural societies in the harsh climate and abandoned places of the land. Small urban centers also began to develop soon afterward.

These early pioneers (the *Yishuv*) were mainly interested in their own survival and development. Although friendly relations sometimes developed with their Arab neighbors,

they were frequently subject to raids and theft originating from nearby towns and villages and so began to develop rudimentary means of defense. It was not until pogroms began to occur in Palestine with greater frequency and ferocity in the first half of the 20th century that the *Yishuv*



began to form more advanced hierarchical military structures. By the late 1930s, these defensive organizations began to take on a true military character, partially with the aid of the British, and by the 1940s as part of military formations with the Allies in World War II. It should also be noted that bonds of mutual defense developed between Jewish settlers and other long-term inhabitants of the land – particularly the Bedouin and Druse. The Druse, whose faith is considered to be a heretical offshoot of Islam, have also suffered from centuries of persecution because of their beliefs.

By the end of World War II and the discovery of the dimensions of the Holocaust, the *Yishuv* was in a better position to defend itself and could take part in efforts to bring displaced

²⁹ https://jewishaction.com/jewish-world/history/whats_the_truth_about_the_uganda_plan/

survivors from Europe and, later, to absorb Jews who were being expelled *en masse* from the newly-independent countries of the Middle East and North Africa.

Thus, by the founding of the state in 1948, the first phase of Zionism was in the process of being realized – as a place of refuge, and as a place that could defend itself and survive, even if only at the most basic level.³⁰

Phase II: Development of Jewish Culture and Self-Government in the Land of Israel

This phase, which began very early in the development of the pioneering settlements, is characterized primarily by cultural development, by which I mean matters related to the *re-establishment* and development of Hebrew culture and democratic self-government in the Land of Israel.

It needs to be emphasized at the very outset that Jewish culture in the Land of Israel is not a new phenomenon. As noted above, even after the expulsion following the Bar Kochba Revolt, a significant Jewish population remained in the Land of Israel under various rulers until the Muslim conquest and, moreover, there has been a continual Jewish presence in the land in one form or other throughout the centuries of Exile.³¹ Jews in the Diaspora have maintained their connection with the land throughout the centuries by their adherence to religious observances that are in sync with the rhythms of the Land of Israel. The Jewish calendar is dominated by holidays and observances of great antiquity that are closely associated with the local climate there.

As a child in New York, it always struck me as odd that the Sukkoth holiday usually fell during a time when it was freezing cold outside. One had to make an effort to even sit in a sukkah, let alone sleep there. And so it is with respect to other major holidays – Passover and Shavuot come in the spring in tune with the changing seasons in Israel while it is still cold in North America, Europe and elsewhere. And so also in the use of the symbols of the Land of Israel



**Bethlehem Jewish Congregation
New Hampshire**

³⁰ For an interesting lecture on this subject, see Haviv Rettig Gur starting at minute 52:00: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKoUC0m1U9E&ab_channel=ShalemCollege-

³¹ Jewish diaspora, *ibid*.

such as the Four Species on Sukkoth.³² In this case, the proof of connection is twofold – the Four Species themselves are native to the land and they harken back to rituals that took place while the Temple still stood in Jerusalem.

This “**cultural software**”³³ may be one of the most important aspects of the Jewish claim to the Land of Israel, perhaps overlooked in the search for archaeological proof (the “hardware” in this analogy) since this cultural heritage constitutes *living testimony* of the connection of the Jewish people with the land. Thus, while Phase II Zionism seeks to reestablish Jewish sovereignty and self-government for the Jewish people in its original homeland (essential for the realization of Phase I), it also seeks to renew and rebuild its cultural heritage. This aspect of Zionism is, on the one hand, perhaps the hardest for its enemies to accept – those who view Zionism as a colonial enterprise – that a people would return to its land after almost 2000 years of exile, something unheard of in the annals of history. Yet, on the other hand, such return resonates among other displaced Indigenous peoples throughout the world who take inspiration from it.³⁴



As noted above, even though, and perhaps in spite of the fact that most of them received their early education in traditional religious observance³⁵, the early pioneers were usually non-religious, if not wholly anti-religious in their outlook. They brought their Eastern European cultural background with them, together with nascent ideas of socialism and communism and a fierce determination to establish democratic structures and processes. While simultaneously revitalizing the Hebrew language, they also sought to develop a new Hebrew culture in music, literature and the arts. These characteristics of the early pioneers gave the new state its political orientation and still suffuse its culture.

³² <https://english.tau.ac.il/news/four-species-of-Sukkot>

³³ In a manner similar to the role that ideology plays as “cultural software” in creating social cohesion as described above except that, in this case, religious observance has served to create multi-generational and spatially global cohesion tied to a specific place – the Land of Israel.

³⁴ *A light for the Indigenous Nations*, Indigenous Coalition for Israel website
<https://www.indigenouscoalition.org/articles-blog/a-light-for-the-indigenous-nations>

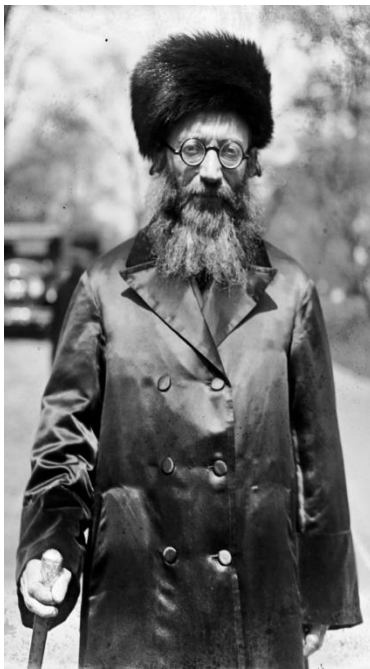
³⁵ For example, at the Volozhin Yeshiva in Lithuania, which was founded by the Vilna Gaon and headed by Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (the Netziv) in the mid-to-late 19th century, Torah scholars studied the Gemara together with radical Marxists and anarchists, many of whom later became leaders of the Zionist movement.

Later waves of immigration brought new and different perspectives and character to the developing state. Following the waves of immigration of dispossessed Jews from the Middle East and North Africa during the late 1940s and early 1950s, eastern *Mizrachi* culture, which is predominantly traditional in outlook, took many years to become accepted in the predominantly secular Ashkenazi culture of the early pioneers. Today, Mizrachi culture has also become a key component of Israeli society and is well integrated into it.



Jewish religious practice in Israel

The Jewish religion itself has been transformed by Zionism, and has undergone rebirth and development in Phase II and is observed in Israel in a variety of ways that reflect the origins of those who practice it.



Harav Avraham Yitzhak
Hacohen Kook

Zionism, which was anathema to Orthodox (as well as Reform) Jews until late in the 19th century, has become a central tenet of national-religious Orthodoxy, in large part through the efforts of Harav Abraham Isaac Kook.³⁶ Kook believed that the building of community and nation, including the efforts of the secular pioneers, was in itself a kind of holy work.

Conservative Judaism has been historically aligned with Zionism at least since the end of the 19th century and today identifies strongly with Zionism and Israel.³⁷ In contrast, Reform Judaism has historically had a more ambivalent attitude about Zionism, although the proportion of its adherents who are supportive has increased since the Holocaust³⁸. Although the

³⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Isaac_Kook

³⁷ Parzen, Herbert. "Conservative Judaism and Zionism (1896-1922)." *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1961, pp. 235–64. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4465884>

³⁸ <https://urj.org/blog/odd-couple-reform-judaism-and-zionism>

Conservative and Reform movements constitute the largest streams of Judaism in the world, most of their adherents live outside of Israel³⁹.

As a result, most official public religious observance (and coercive power) in Israel is dominated by the various streams of Orthodoxy. Orthodox Jews, both those who have lived in Israel for many generations well before the founding of the state and those who have more recently arrived, constitute an influential and growing component of Israeli society, well beyond their actual numbers due to their high birth rates and the role that their representative religious political parties play in the political arena.

Those who studiously ignore or abhor religious practice are also varied in their approach. Many who profess to be avowedly secular and do not observe or practice the commandments nevertheless adhere to the belief that Orthodoxy is the only legitimate form of Judaism. While Orthodoxy monopolizes official Jewish religious practice in Israel, existing strains within Orthodoxy itself, inroads by other streams of Judaism despite the discrimination they face, and secularism in the state, ensure that the final word on the religious character of the state has yet to be written.

[Israeli society today](#)

In fact, Israeli society is today comprised of a mosaic of sub-cultures that reflects the multi-generational historical presence of both Jews and Arabs and of their settlement of the land, Israel's Jewish population also reflects, to a large extent, successive waves of Jewish immigrants from all over the world. Large numbers of immigrants have come from North and South America, Eastern and Western Europe, the former Soviet Union as well as other parts of the world such as the Bukharan Jews of Azerbaijan, the Cochin Jews of India and Beta Israel of Ethiopia. Each of these groups brings different contributions to Israeli society. With time, each succeeding generation is slowly being subsumed into and contributes to the development of Israeli culture.

To a large and increasing extent, the same holds true for non-Jewish Arabic-speaking Israelis who constitute about 20% of the population – primarily Muslim, Christian and Druse. Bedouin, who form part of Israel's Sunni Muslim population and who comprise 3.5% of Israel's citizens, constitute a distinct subculture. Druse and Bedouin have long been

³⁹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/03/15/unlike-u-s-few-jews-in-israel-identify-as-reform-or-conservative/>

integrated into the IDF. More recently, Christian Arab, and to a lesser extent, non-Bedouin Muslims have also become integrated into the IDF, the Border Police and Israel Police. As educational and economic opportunities have expanded over time, succeeding generations of all of these groups are becoming more difficult to differentiate from their Jewish counterparts, with many taking senior positions in the military, medicine and high-tech and share, to some extent, the same trends in music and culture.



Holiday of Holidays Festival

Image by Rachel Kallus, from *The Politics of Space in an Ethno-Nationally Contested City...*, via ResearchGate.

Self-government

The political structure bequeathed by the early pioneers and their urban cousins still forms the basis of today's political landscape. Thus, even while it has provided a democratic form of government that has given voice to most sectors of Israeli society, and has enabled the ingathering of millions of Jews and the ongoing integration of its diverse Arabic speaking citizens, it is still struggling to contain the cacophony of cultures and the conflicting belief systems that comprise it. Moreover, due to this structure, the political culture in Israel is



often subject to extortion and the tyranny of the minority, in particular in matters related to personal status such as marriage and conversion.

Thus, it may be claimed that Israel is still somewhere in the middle of Phase II Zionism in a process that still has a long way to go.

Phase III: A Light unto the Nations

I, the Lord, have called unto you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand, I have kept you, and I have given you as a covenantal people, as a light unto the nations. (Isaiah 42:6)

Any discussion of Zionism as liberation theology requires that we be clear about what we mean by the term “liberation”. In its classical meaning as propounded by Gutierrez (see above), liberation theology is closely associated with Christian belief in sin and Marxist tenets of class struggle.

Liberation has a different connotation in Jewish tradition. In Hebrew, the word *shichrur* (שחרור) is used to indicate liberation from a dominating power such as the British during the War of Independence or as release from debt. In Judaism, liberation is better thought of in our present context in its traditional meaning of *geula* (גאולה), usually translated as redemption⁴⁰. In contrast with Gutierrez’ definition, redemption is not directly associated with any particular socioeconomic theory (although Jewish law and practice does place emphasis on providing for the widow, the orphan and the poor). Furthermore, while *geula* does carry a certain religious connotation of release from sin, it does so in the context of Jewish theology, which does not believe in original sin and which sees each person as responsible for making the choices that shape his or her character and for determining his or her own outcomes.

Redemption in Jewish Tradition

While redemption has traditionally been associated in Jewish liturgy and practice with national well-being (such as protection from enemies) or social well-being (such as the redemption of fields and homes), it has also come to be associated with the end of the Exile and a utopian vision of the world.⁴¹ In Jewish tradition, such redemption is thought to come in various forms. Jewish prayer books are filled with references to ‘the days of the Messiah’ and ‘the Next World’, an idealized world to come, whether as a physical world here on Earth or elsewhere, or as a spiritual world of undefined characteristics. In Judaism, this is an innovative concept that developed in parallel (perhaps not coincidentally) with Christianity in the late Second Temple and early Rabbinic period. The idea of end times appears in several places in Jewish canon, starting with Deuteronomy 4:30, and later in

⁴⁰ *Geula* is also sometimes translated as “salvation”, but such a translation carries with it Christian undertones, which would be misleading and inappropriate in this context.

⁴¹ Jewish eschatology: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_eschatology

the prophets, the Talmud and elsewhere⁴², but there is no official Jewish dogma associated with life after death or with an eschatological 'end of days'.

Messianism, as the yearning for redemption in the form of an all-powerful or all-knowing redeemer who will deliver humanity from its troubles, seems to be a part of human nature (since it appears in many cultures) but is not in itself idolatrous. For all we know, a messianic figure may well appear at some time in the future. However, when brought to its extreme, **messianism as a political force is a form of idolatry** that inevitably leads to disaster. When a figure like Jacob Frank⁴³ comes along claiming to be the reincarnation of Shabtai Zvi and leads his followers to believe they are exempt from the



Shabtai Zvi

moral law, or when a figure like Jim Jones appears and leads his followers to a mass murder-suicide pact in the jungles of Guyana⁴⁴ then such messianism has certainly slipped into the realm of idolatry. Moreover, *Messianists* rarely ask themselves whether the messiah they seek will even agree with their interpretation of the utopian or whether they will be rewarded or punished for their messianism. As a practical matter, **messianism distracts us from the hard work of improving the world ('tikun olam')** – self-improvement, societal development and peaceful international relations. Jewish tradition and our experience with self-styled messiahs such as Bar Kochba, Shabtai Zvi and Jacob Frank have also taught us to be wary of those selling utopian visions.⁴⁵ ***And nowhere in the theophany at Sinai is there a reference to the next world or a messiah – only a set of laws to live by and the commandment to be holy.***

Other forms of Redemption include the idea of rebuilding the Temple and restoring animal sacrifices (the latter being a view currently held by a very small minority of Jews). Another

⁴² For a list of such sources see (in Hebrew) https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/אחרית_הימים

⁴³ Jacob Frank and His Followers <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jacob-frank-and-his-followers/>

⁴⁴ Jonestown: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonestown>

⁴⁵ What effect have powerful messianic movements had on some of the greatest disasters that have befallen the Jewish people throughout history such as the fall of the Second Temple and Shabtai Zvi? Is it mere coincidence or is there a causal relationship between them?

is the re-establishment of the borders of Israel that are described in various places in the Torah and interpreted in various ways in the Talmud.⁴⁶ With respect to the idealized borders of Israel, it should be noted that, while the core Land of Israel is common to all of them; the full extent of these borders (and in many cases, their identity) varies widely and at no time were any of them fully held for an extended period of time, if ever.

Jewish tradition also posits an idealized future in which *'the wolf will dwell with the lamb and the leopard will lie down with the kid'* (Isaiah 11:6) and in which *'the land shall be filled with the knowledge of God, as water covers the sea'* (Isaiah 11:9). Similar prophetic visions occur frequently in Jewish canon.

In Jewish liturgy the Declaration of Faith – the Shema – ends with the injunction to *'not go about after your own heart and your own eyes by which you go astray'* and the prayer service ends with the plea to *'banish idolatry from the Earth'*. Perhaps then Redemption will come through or as a result of the negation of idolatry.

Maimonides offers his opinion that the messianic era, when it comes, will be no different from life as it has lived and the world as it has developed (and is developing) but that we will have a better understanding of ourselves, and of God. There are those who believe that only God can bring final Redemption; there are those who believe that only people will bring it; and there are those who believe in the idea of divine-human partnership. But whether one believes that God is indifferent, intervenes independently in worldly matters or participates in or supports our efforts to reach Redemption in whatever form it takes, most Jews believe that we need to consider how and to what extent it is our job to bring it about **in this world**.

[Return as a central tenet of Redemption](#)

Jewish liturgy since the destruction of the Second Temple and the Exile brought on by the Bar Kochka Revolt has always seen the Return to Israel as an overriding goal. This goal finds expression in numerous places in the prayer book and in literature whose roots go as far back as the biblical prophets. As noted before, the early pioneers gained inspiration from these prophets, even as they rejected the strictures of Jewish religious law that developed during and after the Second Temple Period and throughout the period of Exile.

⁴⁶ Boundaries of the Land of Israel in Tanach and Talmud
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/boundaries-on-the-move/>

Attempts by Israel's enemies, and even among some Jews, to drive a wedge between Judaism and Zionism flies in the face of this tradition of Return. Jews who profess a type of Judaism that says that Zionism and Judaism are two separate things are practicing a form of Judaism that is alien to Jewish tradition⁴⁷, one that is a relatively new and radical phenomenon,⁴⁸ as new and radical as ultra-orthodoxy in its claim that Torah study is somehow equivalent to working for a living or army service.⁴⁹

The Command to be a Holy People

At Sinai, the nascent Jewish nation was bidden to be a holy people.

“... you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Exodus 19:5-6

The idea of chosenness of the Jewish people stems in large part from this passage of Exodus. But this interpretation is misleading to a certain extent. The original Hebrew term *segula* also has the connotation of uniqueness or separateness – or dedication (see below). A better definition might be provided by the Latin term *sui generis* – in a class by itself. Moreover, the 'selection' of Israel also comes with great responsibility and harsh punishment, including Exile, when it fails to meet the standards of the commandments.

In any case, the idea of the Jewish people as bearing the torch of righteousness and holiness in the world has been a hallmark of Jewish thought throughout history, even in the face of murders, expulsions, pogroms and, most recently in historical terms, the Holocaust.

In Hebrew, the word “holy” – *kadosh* – has *at least* two key meanings in the Biblical context. In the sense of a description of God, we use the word *kadosh* to signify something that is divine, that is wholly apart from this world, ultimate in its purity and ascribed only to the realm of God.

In another sense, we use the word *kadosh* to signify something that is dedicated, as set apart for a higher purpose *in this world*, yet somehow linked to the divine. There are

⁴⁷ “The Jew in whose heart the love of Zion dies is doomed to lose his faith in the God of Abraham who gave the land as an earnest of the redemption of all men.” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, **God in Search of Man**, 1955.

⁴⁸ The vast majority of Jews in the Diaspora support and identify with Israel, even if only as lip service and even if they disagree with particular actions or policies of its government. On the subject of non-Zionist Jews in general, and the place of Israel in Jewish identity, see for example: <https://www.ajc.org/news/anti-zionist-jews>

⁴⁹ Perhaps the saying by Shammai is appropriate here: “Make your study of the Torah a fixed practice. Say little but do much” (Pirkei Avot 1:15). In promoting fixed practice, Shammai’s assumption was that time needed to be set aside on a regular basis for study *in the course of earning a living* and that deeds and action have more weight than study and prayer.

numerous ways in which sanctity – *kedushah* – can find expression in this world. Classically, *kedushah* has been associated with great religious piety but, as we have seen over the last several centuries, sanctity can also be articulated in such things as a life dedicated to the welfare of others, to the betterment of society, to community and nation building, or even to the conservation of nature.

As Israelis, we sometimes ask ourselves, even as anti-Semites and ultra-Orthodox groups do⁵⁰, whether we have the right to exist here. In Phase II, we define ourselves as a nation with all of the difficulties of self-government and all of the blemishes of a modern society.

Can Zionism thrive only through the existence of the State of Israel itself?⁵¹ Put another way, while essential to its continuing role as a place of refuge and protection, is the perpetuation of the state the ultimate goal of Zionism, or is there a more sublime and exalted goal? Because we have a modern society with theater and the arts and a powerful army, can we say that we have reached our ultimate purpose as Jews in the world? Are we to be a country like every other country, with Olympic champions, poets and movie stars, mobsters, corrupt politicians and drug addicts?⁵² Or must we find our way to a destiny of holiness, however we wish to define it?

Will this holiness be found simply through the building of a Third Temple or the conquest of an idealized Promised Land? Does this holiness only require such a physical manifestation, or does it also require us, as a people and society, to manifest and radiate the characteristics of a great people and a great society to the rest of the world?

Thus, the question as to whether we have the right to exist here and the commandment to be a holy people are closely linked. **How we define holiness is the key to understanding the third phase of Zionism and to bringing it to fruition.**

While we might be able to say that the first phase of Zionism is well-established today, (although certainly in existential danger at any time) and that the second phase of Zionism

As noted above, the ultra-Orthodox are also modern in the sense that they live in this world, enjoy its benefits and integrate, to whatever degree, into the larger society. While they like to think of themselves as being the sole inheritors of Jewish tradition, at no time during Jewish history was there such a large group within the Jewish people who were dependent on the welfare and the protection of the state and their Jewish brethren. Thus, **Haredi culture is itself a radical modern phenomenon.**

⁵¹ See the appendix for a discussion on who can be a Zionist.

⁵² Ben-Gurion is reported to have said: "When Israel has thieves, prostitutes and murderers, we'll know we have a state."

<https://www.masaisrael.org/do-we-wish-for-an-exceptional-or-normal-state/>

is in process at some level of realization, we can say with a high degree of certainty that the third phase is only in its very infancy and is far from fruition.

On the scientific front, Israel has become a powerhouse in innovation and invention benefiting all mankind in fields such as agriculture, water, communications, technology and medicine. One British commentator in reference to Israel's technological prowess, compared it to "a diamond in a sea of mud"⁵³

Notwithstanding anti-Israel propaganda, the IDF and its ethical standards have been an exemplar for the rest of the world, despite the difficulties encountered in conflict and their occasional breach in practice.⁵⁴ Contrary to accusations of genocide and the IDF's real potential to inflict damage, Israel applies internationally-recognized rules of conduct in war and does its best to avoid civilian casualties in an impossible situation, frequently even at the cost of an increased risk to its own forces.

As the recipient of history's perhaps most horrific act of genocide, most Israelis and Jews



Photo by Stockcake



believe that, without the protection of a strong military developed in Phase I, the Jewish people will be perpetually subject to acts of persecution and genocide even today. **The defeat of implacable forces is a moral imperative.** However, most Jews also believe that true peace can only come when we find common ground (literally and figuratively) with our enemies in the

⁵³ Pat Condell, *Let's Blame the Jews*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=elesXORjBps>

⁵⁴ Col. Richard Kemp, Israel: The World's Most Moral Army
https://assets.ctfassets.net/qnesrjodfi80/3Eo3mGQdYAYwu22W2wEQus/37d06bde6b68f0d90457cddd35eb90b1/kemp-israel_the_worlds_most_moral_army-transcript.pdf

recognition that all people are created in the image of God and, in Jefferson's words, are "created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights."⁵⁵

Democracy and Authoritarianism in Judaism

Judaism is a religion that sanctifies life and espouses love. The word love itself appears frequently in daily prayer books and scriptural texts. The story goes that when Hillel was asked by a potential convert to explain Judaism 'on one foot', Hillel replied that "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah." As such, the entire social contract in Judaism depends on truth-telling and trust – the belief that what your neighbor or colleague will say and do is dependable and trustworthy and that the law, as a necessary means of enforcing such trust, will protect you even as you obey and keep it.

Does Hebrew jurisprudence demand monarchical governance?

Among Jewish religious circles, the common view is that Jewish law requires a monarchical form of governance – having a head of state such as a king who holds a lifetime tenure and usually inherits his position. However, debate still rages within these circles as to whether democratic rule – defined as a form of government in which the will of the majority finds expression in various ways – is preferred and may even be required.⁵⁶



From the historical standpoint, and contrary to the nostalgic view of the reign of King David that permeates Talmudic and other texts, it needs to be pointed out that the Jewish people's experience with monarchical rule has not been great – the Davidic Dynasty led to the split between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, the Babylonian Exile and the destruction of the First Temple. Following return from that exile, the Jews in the Land of Israel enjoyed a measure of semi-autonomy under foreign kings until the relatively short-lived Hasmonean Dynasty⁵⁷,

⁵⁵ America's Founding Documents, the Declaration of Independence

<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration>

⁵⁶ **Introduction to Jewish Democracy**, Rabbi Elisha Aviner February 2022 (in Hebrew).

⁵⁷ Hasmonean Dynasty: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hasmonean_dynasty

followed by Roman rule, the destruction of the Second Temple and nearly two thousand years of exile, only recently ended.

The Torah alludes to the question of whether Hebrew jurisprudence demands monarchical governance in various ways. One example can be found in the Book of Exodus (23:2), where the following appears:

“Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil; neither shalt thou bear witness in a cause to turn aside after a multitude to pervert justice *[but] incline after the majority.*”

Understood in one way, you must not be carried away by decisions of the majority if you doubt its efficacy. On the other hand, Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, following Saadia Gaon, interpreted the phrase “*[but] incline after the majority*” (אחרי רבים להטות)⁵⁸ to mean that we are obligated to follow the majority – that is, public sentiment – when the multitude seeks to do good. This interpretation constitutes one of the foundations of majority rule in both legal and public matters.⁵⁹

Authoritarianism as a form of idolatry

Monarchies – and by extension authoritarian regimes in general – do not depend on the will of the majority or on trust between them and their citizens, but rather on their subjugation through the use of force. In autocracies, the individual cannot speak truth to power; rather it is the powerful who dictate “truth” even when they tell blatant lies. Such top-down regimes cannot tolerate free speech or assembly. Because people do not trust the organs of the state or one another, such societies depend on a strong hand at the top to prevent them from descending into chaos.



⁵⁸ Note that the concluding phrase (in italics), which is cited in several classical interpretations but is omitted in some translations, better reflects the content of the original Hebrew in this context.

⁵⁹ https://www.yeshiva.org.il/wiki/index.php/אחרי_רבים_להטות (in Hebrew). Classical interpretations of this verse focus on its application in cases of capital punishment, whereby a simple majority of one is insufficient for a conviction but is sufficient for acquittal. Nevertheless, the phrase has been broadly interpreted in principle as establishing the concept of majority rule.

Authoritarian societies have a number of characteristics that place them firmly in the **category of idolatry**. Such societies tend to elevate the state, the leader or an ideology to a semi-sacred status. Authoritarian leaders frequently become an object of devotion and a



personality cult develops around them. Traditional, religious or ethical frameworks and practices are subordinated and suppressed in favor of the mechanisms of authoritarian rule, which supplants them with its own rituals, symbols and orthodoxy, demanding total fealty and unconditional allegiance. Authoritarians rule through fear, dehumanizing opponents and punishing heretics, stripping individuals of their autonomy and personal moral responsibility for their actions, replacing it with blind obedience to the leader, who becomes the final arbiter in defining good and evil, truth and destiny. **Such idolatrous**

behavior is not confined to political frameworks only, but rather also **characterizes many religious cults, including some within Judaism itself.**

Democratic traditions in Judaism

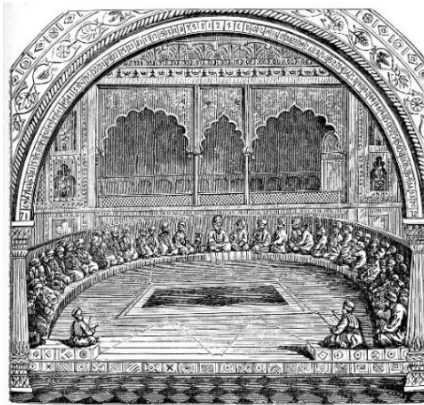
Together with long-standing traditions of inherited leadership, Judaism has also developed as a religion steeped in democratic values. Proof of this can be found as far back as the time of Moses and the rebellion of Korach against the autocratic governance of Moses and Aaron. There, notwithstanding the harsh punishment meted out to Korach and his followers at the time of the rebellion, the sons of Korach survived and were eventually absorbed generations later into Jewish tradition.⁶⁰ As related in the Book of Chronicles, the Prophet Samuel is himself a descendant of Korach.



In referencing the possibility of the anointment of a king, the Torah places limitations on his powers and wealth (Deuteronomy 17:14-15). When Samuel was confronted by a demand for a king by the people, he counted it as a great sin (Samuel I:8:6). In doing so, the

⁶⁰ Hope Bollinger, **The Other Psalmists: Who Were the Sons of Korach?**
<https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/the-other-psalmists-who-were-the-sons-of-korah.html>

prophetic vision of Samuel perhaps allowed him to foresee the eventual fall of the monarchy.



During and after the Second Temple Period, the Sanhedrin acted as a representative body, both geographically and politically, in which the rights of the minority were preserved and respected. The Houses of Hillel and Shammai allowed for respect for contrary positions and even intermarriage between them (even when disputes between them occasionally led to violence between their followers).⁶¹

Following the destruction of the Second Temple, the sages of Yavne enabled Judaism to survive and thrive in Exile through recognition of ‘little temples’ (which we know today as synagogues) with decentralized authority. The Talmud itself is a body of work in which opinions on all sides of any particular issue find expression and for which decisions are made based on persuasion and a preponderance of opinions and evidence. The *Halacha* (the body of Jewish law that has governed all aspects of Jewish life and behavior over the last two millennia in the Diaspora) developed through a decentralized system of discussion and debate until consensus was reached among Torah scholars and rabbis and **their decisions were accepted by the various communities.**

[Where democracy and holiness kiss](#)

In contrast with authoritarian regimes, democracies believe that to the extent that society puts power to enforce the law in the hands of its institutions, those who wield such power must themselves be subject to the law and must gain and keep the trust of those who grant them such power. The 17th century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza⁶² was the first to recognize and explain that, as individuals, we cede some of our autonomy to the institutions

⁶¹ Contrast this with the situation today where some Orthodox sects forbid marriage with other Orthodox sects and where the Rabbinic refuses to recognize marriages that are carried out by Orthodox rabbis who are not sanctioned by the state, not to speak of marriages carried out by non-Orthodox streams of Judaism.

<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/170025-180316-israeli-couple-defies-restrictive-laws-on-marriage-taking-issue-to-supreme-court>

⁶² **Spinoza's Political Philosophy**, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza-political/>

of the state in order to reap the benefits of a social compact that provides us with security and the freedom to pursue our best selves. This approach formed the basis of an intellectual movement that eventually led to the American and French revolutions and to the development of democratic republics throughout the world.

As an extension of Jewish theology, Zionism places emphasis on the behavior of individuals and the responsibility of every person for his or her actions. While sharp differences of approach have historically been, and continue to be, in constant and



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often harsh conflict within it, **Zionism as a movement does not advocate particular ideologies** of the left or right, religious or secular. Rather, in order to realize its goals of ingathering, consolidation and unification of the Jewish people, Zionism requires a form of self-government that enables all components of the Jewish nation to have free expression, to reach self-fulfillment, and to contribute to the continuing development of its culture and governance.

Israel's Declaration of Independence of 1948 and the formation of its first institutions of government reflect both the traditional Jewish culture of argumentation and persuasion and a striving toward the development of democratic norms by its early pioneers and founders. Because Israel's founders believed that democratic government expresses the collective will of the people, where each person bears the image of God, they also believed that it would be the best way to manage the life of the nation, leading to optimal happiness and peace, both domestically and among peoples.

This approach toward a democratic and Jewish polity with an independent judiciary, including the development of a meritocratic civil service (with some exceptions, but with steady progress toward this ideal) has been a basic feature of governance in Israel since its founding and **has allowed it to develop into the economic and military powerhouse it has become.**

It needs to be emphasized that while autocracies can mobilize massive resources and armies and execute grandiose projects, it is only in democratic societies that permit and encourage free speech and assembly where innovation and the development and social and economic integration of new technologies and ideas take place. The suppression of dissent that characterizes autocracies (i.e. minority opinions that can eventually become majority opinions) also stifles economic and social growth and is, as we have seen, contrary to democratic traditions in Judaism.

In the framework of communal and national struggle, we should always seek moderation and compromise. The adage 'Moderation in all things' is as old as the ancient Greeks. The

Rambam likewise believed we should seek a middle way insofar as possible and avoid extreme solutions. However, **there can never be compromise between authoritarianism and democracy.** In the words of American Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison⁶³: With reasonable men, I will reason; with humane men I will plead; but to tyrants I will give no quarter..."



In democracies, no 'ideal' balance exists between the need for individuals to cede some autonomy to institutions of the state in order to provide for the common good and to ensure their security – and the need to preserve their freedom in the political and religious realms. Such a balance varies from society to society and from time to time.

In developing such a balanced polity, we must, in the words of the Psalmist, find the place where ***Faithfulness and truth meet [and] justice and peace kiss*** (Psalms 85:11) while avoiding the lure of excessive zeal and idolatry.

⁶³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Lloyd_Garrison

A Covenant of Liberation

This essay began with the question as to whether Zionism could be classified as a theology of liberation, akin to those espoused classically by other national and social movements. In exploring this question, I analyzed the characteristics of theology and ideology to try to determine whether it could fit into one or the other category. I further explored the historical and cultural environment that gave birth to the modern Zionist movement. In this exploration, it became apparent that Zionism, while exhibiting characteristics of both, could not easily be defined as either, and that the nature of the Zionist movement, like that of Judaism itself, is unique, in a class of its own – *sui generis* – theologically, ideologically and historically. **The clear conclusion is that Zionism is indeed a theology of liberation within the framework of Jewish belief** in redemption of the Jewish people and humanity as a whole **by means of the proper behavior of the individual, building of a just society and improvement of the world.**

As a movement of national liberation, Zionism has sought to free the Jewish people of the bonds of Exile – with all of its associated features of rootlessness and persecution – while attempting to revitalize Jewish life and culture in its ancient homeland. In so doing, it has laid bare numerous **conflicts of values** at the international, national (i.e., within the Jewish people itself), community and personal levels – while trying to define – and protect – itself.

Traditional Jewish belief posits that the People of Israel encountered the divine at Sinai, both those who were present and those not yet born, as well as those who have subsequently joined the Jewish people through conversion, and that, as a result of such encounter, the Jewish people as a whole has been imbued with an eternal covenant that reverberates to this day.

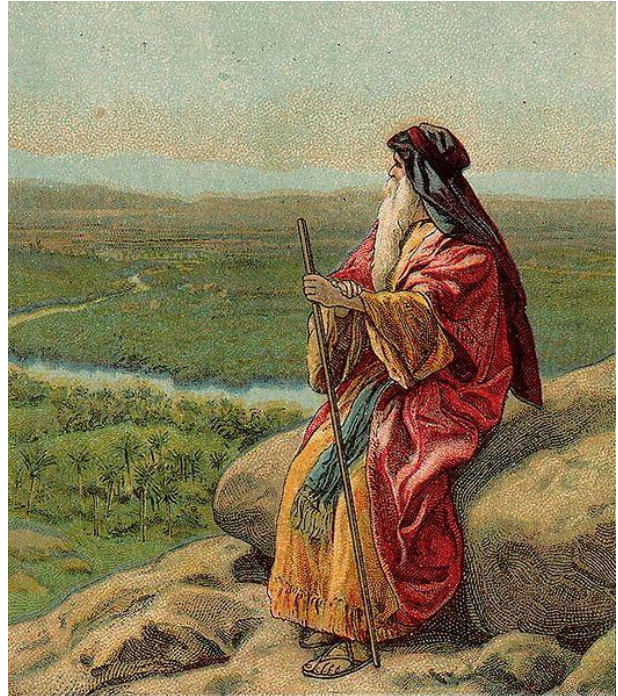


Regardless of whether or not we believe that God exists or if a mass revelation actually occurred at Sinai and, if we believe that God exists, whether we should seek partnership or must wait for divine intervention, **realization of the third phase of Zionism** – call it redemption or call it liberation – **depends on the development and implementation of both Phase I** (the ability to defend the nation) **and Phase II** (the cultural and governmental

means to sustain it). Moreover, **justification for the first two phases depends on engagement in the struggle for the third.**

There are those who would ask why Israel needs to justify its existence and become a 'Light unto the Nations' when the same question is not asked about any other nation. Why isn't it enough for us to have secure borders, to have our own culture, to have a modern and prosperous economy and to occasionally be able to go on holidays abroad like normal human beings? Can we escape or be released from the blessing/curse of chosenness even if we want to?

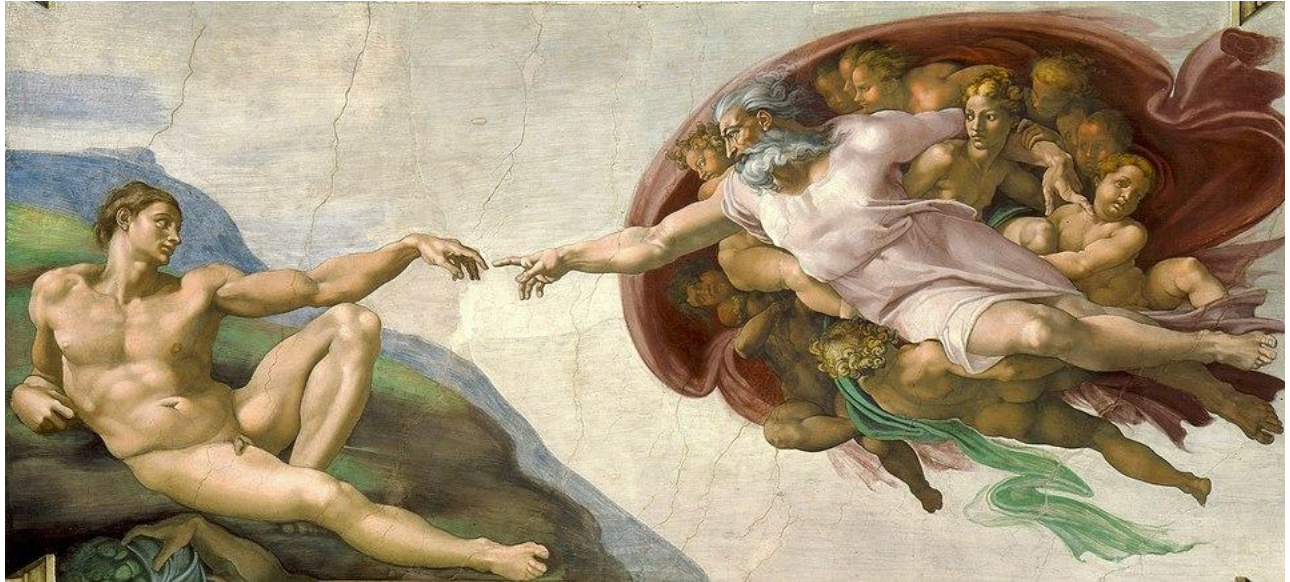
It is precisely because we are one of a kind – having survived in Exile and having returned with our historical memory intact – that we lay claim to this land and that we continue to struggle to redefine ourselves as a people. Has there ever been a nation whose prophets spoke of its role among the nations and served to inspire its pioneers millennia afterward?



*God will bare his holy might in the sight of all the nations
And the very ends of earth shall see the saving grace of our God (Isaiah 52:10).*

That same historical memory places a heavy burden on us. As the inheritors of a hundred generations of yearning for Return, we are tasked here today with finding the way to unifying our dispersed and divided people, with fulfilling the promise of Sinai for redemption and with passing on the torch of righteousness and holiness (however defined) to the generations that will follow us.

No one can say with certainty how redemption will look, both for the people of Israel and for its role in the liberation of Humankind as a whole. However, we can continue to hope that it will come, perhaps as a product of joint human and divine endeavor, acting through the efforts of the disparate constituents of the Jewish people and its supporters – both inside and outside of Israel – in a shared belief in a common destiny.



We are holy when we dedicate ourselves to righteousness, fairness and tolerance. We are holy when we free ourselves from the shackles of enslaving dogmas and ideologies and negate all expressions of extremism and idolatry. We are holy when we dedicate ourselves to bettering this world and to providing care for the widow and the orphan, for the poor and infirm, for humankind and for the earth. We are our best selves when we are trusting, benevolent and empathetic. We are holy when we do all these things and when we act in accordance with the norms of good behavior and moral clarity demanded by the Torah. True liberation will come when we, as a people, bring these things to fruition in this world, not in the next.

Postscript: Will we indeed do it again?

In its current dilemma, Israel once again faces the challenges of unification and the real possibility of failure to realize the promise of Sinai and of renewed exile. The Jewish people has undergone two major exiles in its history. According to tradition, the first occurred at the time of the First Temple due to idol worship, forbidden relationships and murder, and the second occurred at the time of the Second Temple due to internecine 'baseless hatred'. Will there be a third and perhaps final catastrophic exile? Will it be due to the **arrogance of a zealous minority** driven by idolatrous beliefs of intellectual, racial and clan superiority, of **claims of preeminence of certain types of religious observance** over other forms of service to God and Humanity, of some **idealized fantasy of life** in 17th century Eastern Europe, of the **sanctity of land over the sanctity of human life**, of **immoral behavior** at the personal and public levels or perhaps due to **the failure of a complacent majority**, of good people who do nothing?

If there is to be true liberation, it must entail freeing ourselves from **the vicious cycle of conquest, settlement, corruption and exile**.

We can each remain true to our beliefs, but breaking the cycle will also require that we free ourselves from the illusions of idolatry in all its forms in the knowledge that **no ideal,**

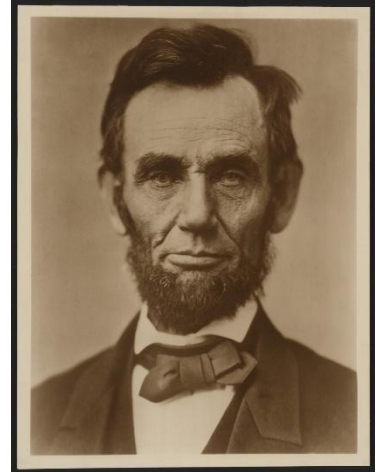
no utopian vision, is fully superior to all others and that the values that guide us must be weighed constantly and find expression in a democratic process in which mutual respect and, yes, humility, have a central place in the public sphere.



The Siege and Destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans Under the Command of Titus, A.D 70 David Roberts 1850

In the words of Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States, at the outset of the American Civil War:

*The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise -- with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.*⁶⁴



Judaism offers a range of paths or visions of redemption. Any one of them or combination of them, or maybe even one that hasn't yet been revealed, can lead to Redemption. Following Lincoln then, true Redemption can only come when we disenthral ourselves of the shackles of our idolatrous beliefs and perceptions, not to disregard them since we can never completely elude them, but rather to recognize the limitations of our own abilities and our own intellect. **To do so only requires that we ask ourselves** if we have slipped over the line from our ideologies and religious beliefs into the realm of idolatry – to take a step back and to recognize that there are other values that need to be considered, to respect minority opinions, to examine and consider them, and then to act, in the understanding that all of our efforts depend upon the holder of the key who is on the other side of the door:

*Many dreams occupy the hearts of men
But only through the Lord's counsel do they come to pass. (Proverbs 19:21)*

As the longing of the Jewish people for a secure place under the sun, as the coalescing of its culture through the free expression of its diverse tribes in a democratic and tolerant polity, and as a people dedicated to its improvement and freedom, both as individuals and as a society – in following such a path, Zionism should and must continue to be the vehicle through which the Jewish people can be redeemed and through which the nations of the earth will be blessed.



Alexander Zaid monument - looking east to the Jezreel Valley
Aadir ,2021

⁶⁴ Abraham Lincoln, Annual Message to Congress, December 1, 1862
<https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/congress.htm>

Appendix: Four Related Questions

The essay raises four tangential questions, which I discuss in this appendix:

1. Does one have to be Jewish to be a Zionist?
2. Does one have to believe in God to be a Zionist?
3. Does one have to live in the Land of Israel to be a Zionist?
4. Does one have to believe in the State of Israel as the embodiment of the aspiration of the Jewish people for redemption?

Does one have to be Jewish to be a Zionist?

As to the first question, the answer is a resounding no. There are numerous historical and current examples of non-Jewish Zionists, both inside and outside of Israel, who profess a love of Zion and who have helped in the return to Zion in practical ways such as Lord Arthur Balfour, Lloyd George and Orde Wingate⁶⁵ in England. There are numerous contemporary examples, among them Douglas Murray and Yossef Haddad.⁶⁶ Check this discussion as well.⁶⁷

Does one have to believe in God to be a Zionist?

Also relatively easy. Many Israeli and Jews who are avowed atheists identify as avid Zionists, from across the entire political spectrum.⁶⁸

Does one have to live in the Land of Israel to be a Zionist?

The answer to this question requires more nuance. There are many people who are working on behalf of the State of Israel in the Diaspora. Even though they never intend to live on the land or be a part of its society, they support its development through their work, through contributions or through support for those who do.

It should also be emphasized that the belief in Zionism does not necessarily mean that the 'Light unto the Nations' will be confined only to the land and those inhabiting it. The universality of the Jewish ethos also means that the redemption, when it comes, will have global reach (which perhaps also accounts for the motivation of many non-Jews in their support).

⁶⁵ *75 years after his death, why Orde Wingate remains a hero in Israel*, The Times of Israel, March 23, 2019.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/75-years-after-his-death-why-orde-wingate-remains-a-hero-in-israel/>

⁶⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoseph_Haddad

⁶⁷ https://www.quora.com/Can-a-non-Jew-be-a-Zionist/answer/Michael-Safyan?ch=10&oid=76663290&share=7afe40dd&srid=uNjv8&target_type=answer

⁶⁸ <https://www.quora.com/profile/Michael-Safyan>

To complete this answer, it needs to be said that, with all due respect to those who support the State of Israel from the outside, the real challenge in reestablishing the Jewish nation is in the doing – in coming to grips with the reality of Israel on a daily basis, in contributing to the national dialogue by taking part in it, and by building and being built by such participation.

In other words, living in Israel is not an absolute requirement, but it helps all around.

Does one have to believe in the State of Israel as the embodiment of the aspiration of the Jewish people for Redemption?

With respect to this question, it needs to be acknowledged that not all Jews believe that redemption will come through Zionism and the existence of the State of Israel. The prayer of the Chief Rabbi, which is read in one form or another in most synagogues in Israel, refers to the state as the ‘the first flowering of our redemption’ (ראשית צמיחת גאולתנו), i.e., the state is not necessarily the final manifestation of Redemption. Many religious Jews, while supporting the state, see it as a steppingstone to a renewed kingdom under Torah law, i.e., a theocracy.

Other religious Jews, in particular from the ultra-Orthodox end of the spectrum, do not support the establishment of the state and many are vehemently opposed to its existence. This position is based on a midrash⁶⁹ used by Rav Yehuda (3rd Century CE) to convince his disciples not to make Aliyah but rather to wait for God to send a sign that redemption has begun. To refute such a claim from the scriptural standpoint and to show that the work of this world is the result of a partnership (or struggle) between the divine and humankind, one need only reference the negotiation that was held between Abraham and God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, Jacob’s ‘deal’ with God at the Ladder when leaving Canaan and his struggle with the angel upon his return. from whence his very name Israel is derived (“...for thou hast striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” (Genesis 32:29)). While such theologically-based anti-Zionist opinions among the ultra-Orthodox have been directed at the Zionism of the last two centuries and at the state (all the while in many cases accepting its protection and largesse), they do not negate the overarching goals of Phase III Zionism – only the opinion that redemption, however it manifests itself, cannot be brought about by human initiative.

⁶⁹ Cited in Ketubot 111a, (with thanks to Rabbi Gil Nativ for the reference). See the following link for the complete Talmudic discussion on this subject:
<https://www.sefaria.org.il/Ketubot.111a.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

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Responsibility for the content and accuracy of the historical background provided and for the opinions expressed herein are those of the author, solely.