

# What is Zionism Anyway?

## Different Political and Ideological Approaches to Zionism

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### Political-National Zionism

#### **1. David Ben-Gurion: Excerpt from "The Imperatives of the Jewish Revolution," 1944** (1886-1973 | Poland and Israel)

*Galut* (Exile) means dependence – material, political, spiritual, cultural, and intellectual dependence – because we are aliens, a minority, bereft of a homeland, rootless and separated from the soil, from labor, and from basic industry. Our task is to break radically with this dependence and to become masters of our own fate – in a word, to achieve independence. To have survived in the *Galut* is not enough. We must create, by our own effort, the necessary conditions for our future survival as a free and independent people. The meaning of the Jewish revolution is contained in one word-independence. Independence for the Jewish people in its homeland! Dependence is not merely political or economic; it is also moral, cultural, and intellectual, and it affects every limb and nerve of the body, every conscious and subconscious act. Independence too means more than political and economic freedom; it involves also the spiritual, moral, and intellectual realms, and, in essence, it is independence in the heart, in sentiment, and in will.

#### **2. Theodor Herzl: Excerpt from "The Jewish State," 1896** (1860-1904 | Austria-Hungary)

The "Jewish Question" still exists. It would be foolish to deny it. It is a misplaced bit of medievalism that the civilized nations do not seem able to shake off. We are naturally drawn to those places where we are not persecuted, and our appearance gives rise to persecution. This is the case, and it will inevitably be so...We are a people – one people... The whole plan is essentially simple. Let sovereignty be granted to us over a portion of the globe adequate to meet our national requirements.



## Cultural-Spiritual Zionism

### **3. Ahad Ha-Am: Excerpt from “*The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem*”, 1905**

**Asher Zvi Hirsch Ginsberg (1856–1927 | Russia & Israel)**

In exile, Judaism cannot... develop its individuality in its own way. When it leaves the ghetto walls, it is in danger of losing its essential being, or – at the very least – its national unity; it is in danger of being split up into as many kinds of Judaism, each with a different character and life, as there are countries of the dispersion.

Judaism... can no longer tolerate the *galut* form which it had to take on when it was exiled from its own country. Without that form, however, its life is in danger. So it seeks to return to its historic center, where it will be able to live a life developing in a natural way, to bring its powers into play in every department of human culture, to broaden and perfect those national possessions which it has acquired until now, and thus contribute to the common stock of humanity a great national culture, the fruit of the unhampered activity of a people living by the light of its own spirit. For this purpose Judaism can, for the present, content itself with very little. It does not need an independent state, but only a good-sized settlement of Jews working without hindrance in every branch of civilization, from agriculture and handicrafts to science and literature... When our national culture in Palestine has attained that level, we may be confident that it will produce men in the Land of Israel itself who will be able, at a favorable moment, to establish a State there - one which will be not merely a State of Jews but really a Jewish State.

### **4. Martin Buber: Excerpts from *Hebrew Humanism* and *Letter to Mahatma Gandhi* (1939 and 1942) | (1878–1965 | Austria-Hungary & Israel)**

*Excerpt from Hebrew Humanism*

I am setting up Hebrew humanism in opposition to that Jewish nationalism which regards Israel as a nation like unto other nations and recognizes no task for Israel save that of preserving and asserting itself. By opposing Hebrew humanism to a nationalism which is nothing but empty self-assertion, I wish to indicate that at this juncture the Zionist movement must decide either for national egoism or national humanism. If it decides in favor of national egoism, it will suffer the fate which will soon befall all nationalisms. If it decides in favor of Hebrew humanism, it will be strong and effective long after shallow nationalism has lost all meaning and justification, for it will have something to say and to bring to mankind. Israel is not a nation like other nations, no matter how much its representatives have wished it during certain eras.

*Letter to Mahatma Gandhi*

Israel is chosen to enable it to ascend from the biological law of power, which the nations glorify in their wishful thinking, to the sphere of truth and righteousness. God wishes humans, whom He has created to become human in the truest sense of the word, and wishes this to happen not only in



sporadic instances, as it happens among the nations, but in the life of an entire people, thus providing an order of life for the future of mankind, for all the peoples combined into one people. Israel was chosen to become a true people, and that means God's people. We do of course need the conditions of normal national life, but these are not enough.

#### **5. Rav Abraham Isaac Kook: Excerpt from "The Land of Israel," 1910**

*(1865–1935 | Latvia & Israel)*

The land of Israel is not something apart from the soul of the Jewish people; it is no mere national possession, serving as a means of unifying our people and buttressing its material or even its spiritual survival. Eretz Yisrael is part of the very essence of our nationhood; it is bound organically to its very life and inner being. Human reason, even at its height, cannot begin to understand the unique holiness of Eretz Yisrael. Reason cannot stir the depths of love for the Land that are within our people. What Eretz Yisrael means to the Jew can only be felt only through the Spirit of the Lord that is in our people as a whole. Jewish original creativity whether in the realm of ideas or in the arena of daily life and action, is impossible except in Eretz Yisrael...In the holy land man's imagination is clear and lucid, clean and pure, capable of receiving the revelation of Divine truth and of expressing in life the sublime meaning of the ideal of the sovereignty of holiness.

## **Non-Zionism & Anti-Zionism**

#### **6. Rav Eliezer Menachem Shach: Excerpt from Writings and Articles**

*(1899–2001 | Lithuania & Israel)*

We see a terrible and frightening sight. A collective revolt against the kingdom of heaven... There is a tremendous difference between an individual who sins in matters concerning himself, and a mass community that has organized to live systematically a life of sin and iniquity. This is especially serious when there exists a Hebrew government in Eretz Israel... We are talking about free Jews, in our own state, the State of Israel, with our own president, with a government and an army, everything our own product – and who is it that prevents our holy Sabbath being observed here? It is a state of [secular] law, and not a state of the halakha. And in this regard things are worse here than abroad – since there, everyone who transgresses commits an individual sin, while here sinning is legalized. According to our conviction and faith, those who presume to maintain the state are those who endanger it.

#### **7. George Steiner: Excerpt from an Address to the American Jewish Congress, 1970**

*(1929–2020 | France, United States & England)*

Far from resenting his status in the gentile communities, or, more accurately, the armed camps of the diaspora, the Jew ought to welcome it. What he may have inherited of nomadic centuries, the remarkable antennae he has grown for linguistic adaptations, his skills as an agent of change, his fascinating ability to live in time as others live in concrete space – these have equipped the Jew to



live “in transit.” To those who accuse us of harboring divided loyalties, we answer that our loyalties are as divided as the possibilities of right action. To those who denounce us that we have never fully accepted the hopes or purposes of the nation-state in which we are citizens, we say that no nation-state so far established has produced hopes or purposes fully acceptable. A marginal condition can be a richly creative one.... One need be neither a religious fundamentalist nor a mystic to believe that there is some exemplary meaning to the singularity of Judaic endurance, that there is some sense beyond contingent or demographic interest to the interlocking constancy of Jewish pain and of Jewish preservation. The notion that the appalling road of Jewish life and the ever-renewed miracle of survival should have as their end, as their justification, the setting up of a small nation-state in the Middle East, crushed by military burdens, petty and even corrupt in its politics, shrill in its parochialism, is implausible.

### **8. Shaul Magid: Excerpt from “Zionism’s History Is Also a History of Jewish Anti-Zionism” (Jan. 2024)**

*(1958–present | United States)*

But one of the things that Zionism produced was what was called “the Arab question.” That is, how is Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel going to work, [given that] in the early periods of Zionism, a majority of Palestinians are Arabs, and after the establishment of the state a large minority are Arabs? That was a question that bothered people like David Ben-Gurion. It’s a question that has bothered people all the way up to the present. And it’s a problem that in some way underlies the issue that we’re facing post-October 7. That’s not to say that the lack of a resolution to the Arab question brought about the attack of Hamas on October 7, but the way in which the Arab question was never significantly dealt with in terms of questions of resources, equality, justice, and the question of integrating the Arab minority into the democracy. This is even before ‘67 — this is from 1948 until June 1967, and afterward of course the occupation. October 7 in some ways changed everything, and perhaps in some ways changed nothing. By changing nothing, I mean that the same issues, the same challenges, the same problems, the same complexity that existed in Israel on the question of Zionism as a Jewish liberation project, and the Arab question, and questions of justice and equality and democracy are going to remain.