

The Jews of Privilege

Peter Beinart thinks Jews don't need Zionism. That's because he's never needed it himself.

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JULY 09, 2020

In today's world, when the Jewish people have realized one of the essential tenets of Judaism—return and redemption—in the form of refounding a Jewish state in the Land of Israel, the debate over Zionism and anti-Zionism essentially consists of two arguments: One, obviously, is the Zionist argument; the other is the racist argument.

The Zionist argument holds that the Jews are a people; that because they are a people, they possess the same inalienable and absolute rights as any other people; and that among those rights is that of self-determination in a nation-state.

The racist argument holds that non-Jews have the right to decide whether the Jews are a people or not; that the Jews are not a people and as such, have no collective rights; and that because of this, the Jewish state is an abomination before God and/or the catechism of human rights and equality.

It is sad, but by no means unexpected, to see even a small minority of Jews embrace the racist argument in the 21st century. The reasons for doing so are myriad—alienation from Jewish identity, the desire to divest oneself of a millennial burden, well-meaning idiocy, the desire to assimilate into non-Jewish society, fear of what the neighbors might think, and a frenzied moralism that internalizes the Oedipal frisson and anxiety of influence with which Christian, Muslim, and secular Western societies have always viewed the Jews and Judaism.

This phenomenon has been illustrated again in recent days by pundit Peter Beinart's embrace of the racist argument. Beinart has been heading in this direction for a long time, and many suspected that this would be his endgame. Nonetheless, his argument has been duly enshrined by the opinion editors of *The New York Times*.

To a great extent, Beinart's arguments are desperately boring, as the racist argument is as old as Zionism itself, and is repeated ad nauseum throughout the international media and institutions of higher education—but the basic points are worth reiterating.

Beinart writes, "It's time to abandon the traditional two-state solution and embrace the goal of equal rights for Jews and Palestinians. It's time to imagine a Jewish home that is not a Jewish state."

In advocating such, Beinart also blames Jews for being too worked up over the Holocaust, which gave them an inordinate fear of being slaughtered en masse. “This Holocaust lens leads many Jews to assume that anything short of Jewish statehood would mean Jewish suicide,” he says. In fact, he assures us, “Palestinians will live peacefully alongside Jews when they are granted basic rights.”

“Israel-Palestine can be a Jewish home that is also, equally, a Palestinian home,” according to Beinart, who apparently is acquainted with the history of no other Middle Eastern country besides Israel where Jews, Muslims, and Christians do live peacefully side-by-side. “And building that home can bring liberation not just for Palestinians but for us, too.”

While it is, as aforementioned, a bit of a bore to deal with such palsied and decayed talking points, it is worth pointing out their essential fallacy.

While there were a few early Zionists who advocated a “Jewish home” rather than a state—most notably Ahad Ha’am—they never held that this was an ideal situation. They merely believed it was the only form in which Zionism could practically be realized. They turned out to be wrong, and it is as simple as that. History rendered its verdict, and it is likely that Ahad Ha’am and his followers would be quite happy with the result, which has far exceeded their wildest expectations.

It should be equally clear, moreover, that those advocating for a “Jewish home” were always a small minority in the Zionist movement. From Theodor Herzl—whose founding manifesto was, of course, called *The Jewish State*—to David Ben-Gurion, the goal was always a Jewish *state* in the clearest, most specific, and complete sense of the word.

Moreover, it is quite clear that Beinart fails to grasp one of the central arguments of Zionism: Equal rights are essential, *but they are not enough*. For the Jews, true equal rights can only be realized *in a Jewish state*. And the proof is that Jews enjoyed equal rights in Europe for over a century, during which they were subjected to hatred, violence, and ultimately genocide. In today’s Europe, and indeed, depressingly, in the United States, the Zionist argument is as salient as ever, with a horrific eruption of anti-Semitic ideology and violence, including racist murder.

And this, of course, brings us to the Holocaust. While the imperative of the Zionist argument was clear as early as the Dreyfus affair—from which Herzl took his political goal of statehood—the Holocaust is its ultimate proof. It revealed to us all that “equal rights” in a secular Western society is no barrier to genocide when the Jews are involved, and that such rights can only be fully realized when the Jews are accorded equal *collective rights*, including the right to self-defense, which is only possible in a Jewish state.

As Ben-Gurion once put it: Zionism is not a question of the Jews and the Arabs, it is a question of the Jews and the world. The world’s responsibilities to one of its smallest, most gifted, and most horrifically oppressed minorities is, or ought to be, clear. The dereliction of that duty—the declaration that the Jews alone among peoples are not accorded equal rights *as a people*—is both self-evidently racist and, it must be said, a paper genocide; a

condemnation to live out our existence as eternal victims and as targets of a globalist apartheid without justice or mercy. In effect, a death sentence that is always at hand to be enforced should it prove amenable to the whims of the next Haman.

What is fascinating, however, is that Beinart describes this as “liberation”—and this perhaps points us to the motivation behind Beinart and his minority of Jewish comrades.

It is a simple fact that the overwhelming majority of Jews—possibly upwards of 90%—remain resolutely Zionist. That is because Zionism is and indeed always has been a movement of the Jewish masses, often pursued in the teeth of a tiny, privileged minority that imagined itself to be exempt from the common fate. As Herzl said when met with the enthusiastic masses of suffering Eastern European Jews—regarded with so much contempt by the wealthy and middle-class Jews he knew in Vienna—“I am now a man of the poor.”

And indeed, if there is anything clear about Beinart, it is that he is immensely, indeed stunningly privileged.

It is by no means insignificant that he grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I was born across the river in Boston, and I know Cambridge. A wealthy suburb where Harvard University is located, Cambridge is a citadel of social and academic privilege. Equally so is its Buckingham Browne and Nichols School that Beinart attended.

I came from a wealthy suburb as well—the Jewish enclave of Brookline. But we were the other Jews. My father was a very hardworking but unquestionably struggling small businessman who drove our rusting family cars into the ground because we couldn’t afford to replace them. When the back window was smashed in one winter, he taped a garbage bag over it and we drove around freezing and breathing gasoline fumes until he could get the cash together to replace it. Our home, badly in need of repair, was left with peeling paint and walls that were half knocked in because we ran out of money to continue the renovation. I went to public schools, where I was often the only or almost the only Jew in the room. Among other things, I was once screamed at by a Muslim fellow student that I should get out of the Israel I had never been in. That was in the fifth grade. I heard another student muttering about “fucking Jews” after a confrontation with a friend of mine. That was freshman year of high school. And this was all pre-second intifada. What it is like now I cannot imagine.

But I have known Jews of privilege all my life. They were the ones who attended the private schools. The ones whose parents went to college. The ones with swimming pools and a new car every year. The ones whose parents would come to Passover Seder and compare Moses to Osama bin Laden and ask if it wasn’t, after all, entirely unreasonable to blame Israel for 9/11. The ones who rolled into Yale and Harvard and Princeton as if it was effortless to shell out hundreds of thousands of dollars for a permit to enter the WASP middle class. The ones who made it, who passed, who got in the door, and have thus concluded that there is nothing left to worry about. They are happy to meld into the great unknowable McDonald’s that is middle-class American culture.

And why shouldn't they be happy? They have never had to face the thing itself. They were never told by a Muslim friend that Israel has no right to exist and Louis Farrakhan is marvelous. Never told by a Christian that Israel's depredations are born of Judaism's rejection of Jesus' teaching of universal love. Never told by an unctuous college professor that Israel was, in fact, very much to blame for 9/11. Never faced, in fact, that brick wall beyond which a Jew, even an American Jew, cannot go when he confronts the anti-Semite, because the anti-Semite is insane, and one cannot argue with insanity. If there is an essence to privilege, it is shelter, and in being sheltered, the Jews of privilege do not know and have not experienced any of this; and as such, they render themselves useless to the rest of us.

At best, these Jews of privilege are simply indifferent to Zionism, Israel, and indeed the Jews themselves. And I am not speaking here of Judaism or religion or Halacha or even something as complex as "identity." I simply mean the act of existing, of being what you are, because you will never be anything else, and the knowledge that there is no shame in that.

At their worst, however, and often quite easily, Jews of privilege embrace the racist argument. They wax poetic about Noam Chomsky and Edward Said. They join and even lead anti-Zionist groups capable of the most extraordinary rhetorical and physical violence. They travel to the West Bank and Gaza for purposes unknown but no doubt malign. They lend their convenient identities to provide cover for the most egregious of ideologies and actions. And in their moments of supreme honesty, they will straightforwardly tell you the Jews have become the Nazis. They posit, in short, that Zionism is, at best, a very, very bad thing. And they do so, I imagine, because they think they don't need it. And because they don't need it, they think the Jews don't need it. But this is not their decision to make, and only out of privilege comes such presumption.

Beinart is heir to this presumption because his privilege has been lifelong, to such an extent that he likely thinks he actually earned it. He attended Yale University and became a Rhodes scholar, studied at Oxford, landed a cushy job and national platform at the old *New Republic*, and is now a sought-after commentator in academia and the media whose repudiation of Zionism is a somewhat obvious but nonetheless effective sleight of hand that absolves his support for the Iraq War while playing the well-worn part of the apostate martyr who must regrettably abandon his Zionism in order to save his liberalism.

It is entirely reasonable then to see in Beinart precisely those privileged Viennese bourgeois of whom Herzl despaired. And there is little difference between Beinart's contempt for Zionism and that of those bourgeois for the great masses of Ostjuden—the suffering Eastern poor who hailed Herzl as a new Moses.

I have lived in Israel for almost 20 years, and I have seen these masses with my own eyes. Jews like myself who never went to the schools of the wealthy, who never attended Yale or Oxford, who never had the chance to wonder if they should accept the Rhodes scholarship or not.

They have come from everywhere, these Jews of Zionism—from Germany to Ethiopia to Poland to Morocco to France to Iraq to the former Soviet Union and a thousand other

places. And most have come because their “equal rights” in those places proved nonexistent in the face of a millennia of hatred. In Israel, often for the first time in history, they are citizens with rights. And they enjoy those rights because, and only because, of Zionism.

Thankfully, I did not flee persecution when I came to Israel. I came out of love and a belief in the idea of the Jewish state. And it was only thanks to that state that I am what I am now. From the Israeli teachers, friends, and fellow students who helped me earn two degrees despite the struggle to learn Hebrew simultaneously; to my generous and forgiving landlord, who defines the word *tzadik*; to the Israeli writers, editors, and mentors who thought my voice was, or at least might be, important—it was only thanks to Jewish and, yes, Zionist solidarity, sympathy, and collective and individual loyalty that I was able to achieve anything. I needed Zionism, and it was there for me.

In his privilege, however, Peter Beinart believes he does not need Zionism. And in that same privilege, he cannot see these Jews of Zionism. He cannot see us, does not care about us, does not believe in us, and cannot love us. Instead, Beinart wants to liberate himself from us.

But there is something he does not know, but I think I do know: We are Zionists because we were not privileged. And in not being privileged, we needed each other. We needed the dignity and empowerment and the capacity for mutual aid and self-defense that only a state could give us.

Perhaps Beinart is right that he does not need what we need, but I doubt it. Equality is a fine thing, but for the Jews it has proved fleeting and conditional. If you’re good, Beinart says, you might be able to be equal to Palestinians in a shared state. If you’re bad, Beinart threatens, we will leave you at the mercy of a nationalist movement dedicated to your ethnic cleansing and a theo-Nazi movement dedicated to your genocide. And only we decide when you’re good.

What we Jews of Zionism know, however, is that in our return and redemption, we have rendered such judgments moot. In the contest of history, the racist argument has lost, and the Zionist argument has won. And against this reality, Jews of privilege like Beinart may struggle mightily, but it is unlikely they will be any different from those who so long ago howled to be returned to bondage in Egypt.

For we Jews of Zionism, our answer to them and to Beinart is a simple one. As one of us once said, “We do not have to apologize for anything. We are a people like all other peoples. We are what we are. We are good for ourselves. We will not change and we do not want to.”

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