

Zionism Doesn't Need 'Divine Promise' to Justify Jewish Nation-state

<https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.818326>

By relying on faith-based arguments devoid of any diplomatic or legal validity, Israeli politicians are undermining the solid foundations of the Zionist narrative, which have been accepted by the international community for a century

“The Bible says that God promised the Land of Israel to the Jewish people,” is a claim frequently made by Israeli ministers and lawmakers. “We do not need anything more than that,” they say. And in the words of the late Rabbi Shlomo Goren, “No national or international law has the power to change our status, our rights. By the law of the Torah, these areas are to be the Land of Israel, under Jewish rule and Jewish sovereignty.”

The process of religion being wedged into all areas of our lives has not bypassed Zionism either, and it's paying a lot of attention to the Zionist narrative. A concerted effort is being made by some Israeli ministers to erase the canonical history of Israel's founding – and they aim to replace the international stamp of approval for the Jewish people's right to a state in its own land with religious and messianic justifications that reject any possibility of compromise.

First, this is an attempt to conflate the validity and rightful existence of the Jewish nation-state with religious faith. That is, if you do not believe in the divine promise of the Land of Israel to the Jewish people, you can't justify the existence of the State of Israel. But the existence of the Jewish nation-state does not require a belief in God, and the realization of the Jewish people's right to self-determination in its homeland does not require a divine promise.

Second, this conflation rules out any notion of compromise in light of the current reality – because, for them, any deliberate concession (of territory in the Land of Israel) constitutes a conscious violation of the sacredness of the land and of God's covenant with Abraham. In other words, someone who believes in the divine promise cannot concede any territory.

Ignorance about Zionism's history – which is growing steadily among children in the educational system and among the public in general – provides a convenient platform for the activities of those who seek to increase religiosity and to turn the national conflict into a religious one. But by relying on faith-based arguments devoid of any diplomatic or legal validity in the 20th and 21st centuries, they are undermining the solid foundations of the Zionist narrative that have been accepted by the international community for a century.

The story of the rebirth of Israel is a case of rejecting holiness and messianism in favor of secularism and science when it comes to bearing responsibility for our own fate. “Faith unites us, science makes us free,” wrote Theodor Herzl in his 1896 book “The Jewish State.” And in its closing resolution in 1897, the First Zionist Congress determined that the establishment of a state for the Jewish people in what was then Ottoman Palestine would be based on legal and diplomatic recognition and legitimacy from the international community, based on the accepted and standard practice at the time. And this Zionist aspiration did indeed gain diplomatic-legal, historical, practical-egalitarian and moral validity from the international community.

First was the legal-diplomatic recognition, which comprised three layers. The first is the Balfour Declaration, given by Great Britain – the major power that conquered Ottoman Palestine during World War I. Its validity rests on the “imperial principle,” which was at the heart of international custom until the early 20th century. The PLO was also aware of the validity of the declaration, as Edward Said – then a member of its steering committee – wrote in 1979: “The declaration's importance is first and foremost in being the legal basis for Zionism's claim to Palestine.”

The second layer is the decision by the victorious powers at the San Remo Conference in April 1920 to award mandates to Britain and France over the territories they conquered in the Middle East – including Palestine, where the Balfour Declaration would be realized. These powers recognized the validity of the Zionist aspiration, as French Foreign Ministry representative Jules Cambon stated in June 1917: “It would be a deed of justice and reparation to assist, by the protection of the Allied Powers, in the renaissance of the Jewish nationality in that land from which the people of Israel were exiled so many centuries ago.”

And as U.S. President Woodrow Wilson stated in March 1919: “I am persuaded that the Allied nations, with the fullest concurrence of our own government and people, are agreed that in Palestine shall be laid the foundation of a Jewish Commonwealth.”

The validity of the decision by the major powers rested on the principle of self-determination expounded by Wilson and adopted by the League of Nations, which was established in January 1920 following the Versailles Peace Conference. Section 22 of the Versailles Treaty states that nations not ready for independence will initially be “entrusted to advanced nations who by reason of their resources, their experience or their geographical position can best undertake this responsibility.”

The third layer is the recognition and support of the international community. First, in July 1922, the League of Nations unanimously (including Iran) approved the Mandate for Palestine that was given to Britain, in which the British were tasked with creating “such political, administrative and economic conditions as will secure the establishment of the Jewish National Home.”

Then, on November 29, 1947, there was the vote on the UN Partition Plan, which set a clear date for the end of the Mandate and the establishment of an independent Jewish state on 55 percent of the land of British Mandatory Palestine.

The second basis for the Zionist aspiration can be ascribed to the historical connection and continuity of the Jewish people with its homeland. The League of Nations rejected the argument of the Arabs (and some Jews) that Judaism is a religion and not a nationality, and that therefore its followers are not entitled to self-determination. It also rejected the claim there was no connection between the Jews of the 19th century and the Land of Israel, as was later argued in Article 20 of the Palestinian National Charter from July 1968, which stated: “The Balfour Declaration, the Mandate for Palestine, and everything that has been based upon them, are deemed null and void. Claims of historical or religious ties of Jews with Palestine are incompatible with the facts of history and the true conception of what constitutes state-hood. Judaism, being a religion, is not an independent nationality. Nor do Jews constitute a single nation with an identity of its own; they are citizens of the states to which they belong.”

Future British Prime Minister Winston Churchill told a delegation of Palestinian Arabs in March 1921: “It is manifestly right that the Jews, who are scattered all over the world, should have a national centre [sic] and a National Home where some of them may be reunited. And where else could that be but in this land of Palestine, with which for more than 3,000 years they have been intimately and profoundly associated?”

The text of the 1922 Mandate for Palestine states clearly and with the support of all the member countries that the League of Nations recognized “the historical connection of the Jewish people with Palestine” and the “grounds for reconstituting their national home in that country.”

The third basis is the practical-egalitarian justification for the Zionist aspiration. British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour saw a solution for the Jewish problem as a need of the hour that was to be met with a just partition. In an August 1919 memorandum he wrote, “And Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.” He viewed the allocation of a sliver of the Arab lands conquered by Britain to the Jewish people as just, and said in a July 1920 speech: “So far as the Arabs are concerned I hope they will remember that the Great Powers, and most especially Great Britain, has freed them, the Arab race, from the tyranny of their brutal conqueror. I hope they will remember it is we who have established the independent Arab sovereignty of the Hedjaz. I hope they will remember that it is we who desire in Mesopotamia to prepare the way for the future of a self-governing, autonomous Arab State. And I hope that, remembering all that, they will not grudge that small notch – for it is no more geographically, whatever it may be historically – that small notch in what are now Arab territories being given to the people who for all these hundreds of years have been separated from it, but surely have a title to develop on their own lines in the land of their forefathers.”

The fourth basis is the moral justification. Amnon Rubinstein and Alexander Yakobson noted in their 2008 book “Israel and the Family of Nations”: “Whereas the Jewish aspiration to national independence was no different in essence from the national aspirations of other peoples, the way in which the Jewish people attained independence was indeed unique – because the Jewish tragedy was unique. Does it mean that it was less justified for that?”

Basically, the international community took the view that it would be immoral to “punish the Jewish people twice.” Once in being forcibly exiled from its land and deprived of all its rights –

including the right to return to its land and forming a significant majority there; and second, to deny it its natural right to self-determination in its homeland, the Land of Israel.

It must be stressed that the broad and strong justification for the Zionist claim does not invalidate the Palestinian aspiration, or vice versa – as Natan Alterman argued in February 1970: “Once we admit the existence of a Palestinian national fiction, from that moment all of Zionism becomes a matter of stealing a homeland from an existing people,” he said. “And to the extent that we are currently helping to root this notion in the world and our inner consciousness, we are undermining the historical and human basis of Zionism.”

Alterman was wrong. Long and profound conflicts, like tragedies, do not arise out of a struggle between good and evil or right and wrong. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the national aspirations may be oppositional, but each has validity. It is not necessarily a zero-sum game. A compromise in the form of an agreed-upon partition would make it a win-win situation, even if it was based initially on narrow interests alone and only later on reconciliation.

Similarly, belief in the divine promise does not require ruling out compromise for the sake of other values – as shown this week by Labor Party Chairman Avi Gabbay. Though he did proclaim fealty to the religious argument that has no international validity when declaring, “I believe in the justness of our existence here. I believe all of the Land of Israel is ours. After all, God promised Abraham the whole of the Land of Israel,” he also added: “But I also believe that since there are 4.5 million Arabs, we have to compromise in order to create a situation in which we live in a state with a Jewish majority and they live in a state of their own.”

We have seen that the Zionist narrative and the Zionist claim to a state for the Jewish people rests on a broad and deep basis. The State of Israel, in the 1967 lines, receiving this full authority, is obligated to respect the decisions of the international community also in relation to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state alongside it. Its officials should refrain from using the biblical story put forth by Habayit Hayehudi and its friends in Likud, which is based on a “divine promise” that has no validity in international relations, and leave that kind of talk to the prime minister’s Bible Study groups.

The Education Ministry must ensure that Israel’s teachers and students are taught about the real, internationally accepted basis for the Jewish state’s existence; the Foreign Ministry should make sure its diplomats are well versed in it; and the Jewish Agency should train its emissaries to recite it abroad. We don’t need anything else.