

Zionism and its Discontents

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Session 3



1. Anti-Zionism

American Council on Judaism (1942)

Founded by leading Reform rabbis in the US who were troubled by the Reform Movement's gradual embrace of the Zionist cause in light of the crisis presented by the Holocaust. ACJ members held to the principles articulated in the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform that Judaism was a religion and not a nationality. The ACJ pretty much vanished after the 6-Day War in 1967 though it has enjoyed a recent revival as anti-Zionism is now being embraced by significant numbers of younger Jews. In its newest iteration, its website recognizes the cultural/historical significance of the State of Israel to many Jews but they disavow any political allegiance or loyalty to the country.

2021 letter of 100+ rabbinical and cantorial students:

We are future leaders of the Jewish community. We are training to teach the Torah and lead the rituals that will hold our joy and our sorrow... Our political advocacy too often puts forth a narrative of victimization, but supports violent suppression of human rights and enables apartheid in the Palestinian territories, and the threat of annexation. It's far past time that we confront this head on. We can no longer shy away or claim ignorance.

2. The Nation State Law (2018)

The Nation-State Bill

The Nation-State Bill is a Basic Law that, for the first time, anchors in law Israel's status as the "national home of the Jewish people." Among its 11 clauses, the bill defines such things as state symbols like the flag and national anthem, the official language, national holidays, the Sabbath, the capital Jerusalem, relations with the Diaspora, and of Jewish settlement. As a Basic Law with quasi-constitutional status (Israel, famously, does not have a constitution or a bill of rights) the bill will guide judicial interpretations of the law and shape future legislation.

Problem #1 - No mention of democracy or equality.

Opponents of the bill note that there is no mention anywhere in the bill—nor in any other Basic Law, for that matter— of the term “equality.” They argue that a Basic Law that seeks to define the character of the state but fails to anchor the principle of civic equality is deeply problematic for any democracy. Because of the need to guarantee minority rights, almost all nation-states in the world include an explicit commitment to the value of equality in their constitution or other core legislation. Israel’s Declaration of Independence contains an explicit guarantee of this sort. Moreover, the bill omits any mention of Israel's democratic character, thereby calling into question the existing "Jewish and democratic" formula that appears in previous Basic Laws.

Problem #2 – Majority-Minority Relations

The Nation-State Bill contains two clauses that affect the standing of Israel's non-Jewish minority groups, especially Arab-Israelis who make up 20 percent of the population. First, the bill effectively downgrades the status of the Arabic language in Israel – from the second official state language (alongside Hebrew) to one holding “special status” in the state. Hebrew is now Israel's sole official language. Second, the bill includes a clause stating that Israel will act to “encourage and promote” Jewish settlement around the country. According to some interpretations, this could lead to discrimination on the basis of nationality in the allocation of land and resources.

Problem #3 – Relations with Diaspora Jewry

The Nation-State Bill defines one of Israel's core purposes: as a sanctuary for Jews all over the world, a physical location for the ingathering of exiles, and as a guarantor of Jewish safety and security. And yet the clauses having to do with strengthening Israel's connection to the broader Jewish people call on the state "to act within the Diaspora" – but not, significantly, within Israel. Opponents of the bill point out that this could encourage Israeli governments – already under enormous political pressure from ultra-Orthodox parties – to make decisions that affect the entire Jewish people, without considering their ramifications on Diaspora Jewry. Thus, they contend, a law that purports to strengthen Israel's Jewish identity could end up undermining the unity of the Jewish People.