

# NOTES FROM A HUMANISTIC, LIBERAL ZIONIST

by

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## A Personal Introduction

I am honored to write this short essay for the Presbyterian Church USA<sup>1</sup>. During the past few years –since the issue of “divestment” which emerged from the Annual Assembly of the PCUSA in 2004, I have been privileged to engage in genuine dialogue with members of the PCUSA on their study tours to Israel, and I have always felt a keen sense of fellowship and a sincere effort on their part to learn more about the Jewish Zionist narrative which underlies the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Accordingly, I am pleased to be able to respond positively to the invitation to write a short reflection as part of your church’s comprehensive study on the Middle East, with a special focus on Israel-Palestine.

Let me begin with a few words about myself. I am a Reform rabbi who grew up in the U.S. and made *aliyah* (Hebrew for “went up”) to Israel with my wife Amy and then 2 daughters ( we now have 3 wonderful daughters) in June 1979, slightly more than 30 years ago, which means that I have spent almost half my life in Israel by now! I grew up in Miami Beach, Florida in a fervently Zionist Jewish home, so I imbibed Zionism from my youth, mostly from my father, Rabbi Leon Kronish, of blessed memory. He was a Reform rabbi at Temple Beth Shalom (House of Peace) from 1944-1996, where he preached and taught by example the meaning and importance of the Jewish state to Jews in America for over 5 decades. He was also one of the leaders of the Reform Jewish movement in the United States from the 1960’s until 1984, when he retired due to illness.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was commissioned for and originally published as part of the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s Middle East Study Committee report in March 2010, and may be also be viewed at: <http://www.pcusa.org/middleeastpeace/pdf/part3a1.pdf>

In an essay that I wrote about my father in a book about him which was published the year he died (1996), I wrote;

“Often, when I am asked why I decided to live in Israel, I answer that I took Ben Gurion’s speeches<sup>2</sup> and my father’s sermons seriously! My parents took my sister and me to Israel for the first time in 1964, the summer after I finished high school. And I fell in love with Israel on that first visit because my father’s love for Israel was infectious and overwhelming.”<sup>3</sup>

Later in that same essay, I explained why the state of Israel was so important to my father, even though he never lived there:

“My father has been a great teacher of the concept that both Israel and the Diaspora are vital for the continuity of Judaism and the Jewish People. Not one or the other, but both are crucial and inextricably intertwined—this has been his greatest message. It is certainly a message that I learned from him and cherish deeply until this very day. And, it is the sort of concept that I believe that we still need to strengthen and develop, as we work towards the future of the local community and the State of Israel with a growing realization of the fact of our interlocking destiny as a people, which binds us together in common concern, caring and commitment.”<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, I am sure that one of the lessons learned by the leaders and followers of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. in recent years, since the beginning of the "divestment" debate, is how important the state of Israel—as the homeland of the Jewish People worldwide—is to American Jews with whom they live in neighborly relations and often work in common cause in many communities throughout North America.

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<sup>2</sup> Ben Gurion was Israel's first Prime Minister and Minister of Defense and he was an inspiring leader and visionary of almost Biblical proportions.

<sup>3</sup> *Gesher VaKeshet, Bridges and Bonds, The Life of Leon Kronish*, by Henry A. Green. Scholars Press, Atlanta, Georgia, 1995, p. 217.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, (p. 217).

In addition to my personal upbringing at home, I am also very much a product of the 1960s in the U.S.A. Not only did I live through the heyday of the civil rights period and the anti-Vietnam War period when I was a college student at Brandeis University (1964-68) and as a student at the Rabbinical college of the Reform movement, the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York (1968-73), but I was profoundly moved and inspired by the victory of Israel over those Arab countries who sought to annihilate the young Jewish state (only 19 years old!). Yes, only 22 years after World War II, there was a serious attempt to destroy the state of Israel in what would surely have been perceived as another Holocaust or a continuation of the one that began in Europe in the late 1930s and early 1940s. It is often amazing to me how easily this is forgotten. Jews everywhere in the world live with this consciousness and visiting groups to Israel begin to understand this better after they pay a somber visit to Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust museum and education center.

It was actually in 1970-71, after a spending a full year as students at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem only three years after the Six Day War of 1967, did my wife, Amy, and I decide that Israel was the place where we would want to live our lives to the fullest extent as Jews in a society and culture committed to the creative survival of the Jewish People. In those years, there was no "intifada" (Palestinian uprising) -- and we thought naively that we were living with what Moshe Dayan called a "benign occupation" with regard to the Palestinians in the territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, whom the Israel government thought were entitled to civil rights (hence the establishment of the Civil Administration), but not to national rights, since at that time, it was illegal to recognize the existence of the P.L.O. (Palestine Liberation Organization) or to speak with any of its leaders. For those who don't remember, from 1967-1986 (the outbreak of the first intifada), Israelis could travel the length and breadth of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and there was no violence or terror threatening normal life.

When we actually made the move and came to live in Israel in 1979, it was a time of relative peace for Israel, six years after "the earthquake" of the Yom Kippur War and seven years before the outbreak of the first "intifada". We were deeply moved—as we still are—by the unique historic opportunity and obligation to live in the Jewish State of Israel, where we would be able to raise our children as full-fledged and proud Jews in the language and culture of the people Israel.

During the last 18 years, I have served as the Director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI), Israel's leading interreligious organization, which I founded in 1991. In my capacity as leader of this institution, I have been invited to seminars at the Vatican several times and I was fortunate to be at the signing of the Fundamental Agreement between the State of Israel and the Holy See, at the end of 1993, a few months after the signing of the Oslo Accords on the White House lawn in Washington D.C. I also work closely with local Palestinians and Christians in an attempt to bring about greater understanding between people in this Land.

In March 2002, I hosted 50 rabbis (as one of the programs of the convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) in Jerusalem that year) at the ICCI Education Center on in the prestigious German Colony in Jerusalem for a panel discussion with a Christian and Muslim Colleague on "The Contribution of Interreligious Dialogue to Peace-building in Israel and the Middle East," a subject about which I have spoken and written extensively during the past 18 years. After the session, I joined a number of other rabbis and their spouses for lunch at the well-known Café Cafit on Emek Refaim St. During the lunch, a terrorist came in to the café and was noticed by a courageous waiter, who tackled him and took away his explosives, and we were saved by this act of bravery (and by the miracle of the non-functioning of the terrorist's detonator!) and, thank God, I am alive to tell the story. When we went back to thank the heroic waiter, the next morning, we were interviewed by Israeli television, and by the end of the day the whole world knew about this incident.

A few days later, my colleagues and I offered a special blessing of gratitude to God at Shabbat morning services held at the educational and cultural center of the World Union for Progressive Judaism in a very emotional and heart-warming ceremony.

Notwithstanding this traumatic experience, I have tried to be a voice for peaceful coexistence here in Israel. Since Israeli society has been moving to the right in recent years, I often find that my voice is a lonely one, but I persist nevertheless. In my lectures to visiting groups in Israel and around the world, I am often asked if Israel will ever live in peace, and my answer is "Yes!" It can and it will happen in my lifetime.

## Zionism as the national liberation movement of the Jewish People

Since the infamous “Zionism is Racism” resolution in the U.N.<sup>5</sup> and since the horrific and continuous anti-Zionist and anti-Israel propaganda of the Arab countries and of some European countries since the outbreak of the first intifada in 1986, the term “Zionism” is greatly misunderstood and purposely distorted in much of the Western world, especially in much of main-line Christianity. This therefore is a good opportunity to set the record straight.

First of all, it is important to note that Zionism is not simply a response to the Holocaust of World War II. Rather, its origins are to be found in Europe some 60-70 years before the Holocaust, during the rise of nationalism at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Zionism is one of the major streams of modern Jewish thought (and action) which arose out of the historical experience of the emancipation of the Jews of Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was –and still is—one of the central Jewish responses to modernity and it offered the Jews of the world a compelling option for Jewish survival in the modern and contemporary world.

The father of modern Zionism, Theodore Herzl, wrote a famous book in 1896 called ***The Jewish State***, which diagnosed “the Jewish Problem” as it was called at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as one of anti-semitism. According to his reading of the situation, there was no real possibility for Jews to survive in Europe anymore, after centuries of pogroms, blood libels and rampant anti-semitism, culminating in the infamous Dreyfus Affair in France of the 1890s. In his view—and the view of many other classical Zionist thinkers of the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century--there was simply no future for Jews anymore in Europe since hatred of the Jews was so endemic to European (Christian) society. The only solution was to leave Europe and return “home”.

And where was home? Clearly, it was the ancient homeland of the Jewish People, the Land of Israel, with which this people had been connected for all of its history, ever since the days of the Bible and in all our wanderings in the Diaspora. Herzl’s theory became known as “Political Zionism” since he proposed a political solution to the Jewish People of his time. Instead of anti-semitism and rootlessness in Europe, the Jews should

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<sup>5</sup> This United Nations resolution was passed in 1975 and revoked in 1991.

establish a state, which would be a “state of the Jews”, i.e., a state with a strong Jewish majority, in which this people—the Jewish People—would “live and breathe free”<sup>6</sup>. In this state, the Jews would live a “normal” national life. They would be a “people like all other peoples”. This state would therefore be first and foremost a refuge for oppressed Jews anywhere in the world who suffer from anti-semitism, a haven for Jews in which their suffering as a humiliated and despondent people would be no more.

This notion of Israel as a refuge for oppressed Jews everywhere still lies at the center of the self-consciousness of the modern state of Israel. It is therefore self-evident to all governments of Israel –and to the Jewish people of Israel—that when Jews were oppressed in the Former Soviet Union or in Ethiopia, it is automatically understood that they be “saved” and brought home to Israel. The same of course was the case for the “remnants” of the Shoah in the years during and immediately following World War Two.

It is important for me to add that what underlies this idea of Zionism—and all other theories of Zionism—is the concept that Jews are a Nation/People! In my briefings to Christian groups who come to Israel over many years, it is shocking to me how this comes as a surprise to them. Yes, the Zionist movement—in all of its streams from the beginning until today—understands the Jews as a national movement, as a people, which originated in Biblical days and somehow miraculously survived for all of its history. To be a Jew, according to all versions of Zionism is to be a member of the Jewish People. This is its revolutionary message to the Jewish World, one that most Jews have accepted in theory, but not always in practice. One can express one’s Jewishness nationalistically, culturally or religiously, but at the base of one’s Jewish identity is the notion of belonging to an ancient people which has always maintained a very strong attachment to its ancient homeland.

Theodore Herzl was not the only Zionist thinker at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to propose radical new ideas for the Jewish People. There were many of them. One of them was a man originally named Asher Ginsberg, who took the name Ahad Ha’am (“One of the People”). He and his followers argued strongly with Herzl and his followers in the early years of the Zionist movement in Europe. In contrast to Herzl, he felt that the main problem facing the Jews—certainly those in Western Europe, as opposed to those in

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<sup>6</sup> In the words of our national anthem, *Hatikvah, the Hope*.

Eastern Europe—were assimilation, not anti-semitism. In the West, the Jews were not persecuted or oppressed. In places like Germany, France and Britain, they were welcomed as full citizens for the first time in Jewish History. So, many of them preferred to be Frenchman or Englishmen or Germans of the Jewish Heritage. Many of them abandoned Jewish Religion for the newer ideas of the Enlightenment—Science, Democracy, Rationality, Progress.

Ahad Ha-am argued that the only place where Jews would live out a full Jewish national culture would be in their own homeland. In Israel, they would revive the Jewish language of Hebrew and with it Hebrew literature, art, music and dance, all major elements of a thriving national culture. Only in Israel would Jews study the Bible as their national history. Only in the land of Israel would they feel a natural connection to the land and to every place in it as part of their own national heritage.

In contrast to Herzl, Ahad Ha-Am further argued that the goal of returning to Israel was not “normalization”. Rather, Israel must be a unique Jewish society, living up to the ideals of the Biblical prophets of Israel by setting up an ethical and just society which cares for the minorities within its midst.

Whether one subscribed to the political Zionism of Herzl or to the cultural Zionism of Ahad Ha-am, there was a definite sense that there was no future for the Jewish People outside of its homeland, the Land of Israel.

In addition, there was a minority point of view in the early years of the Zionist Movement in Europe at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which was called “Religious Zionism”. In contrast to political and cultural Zionism, religious Zionists did not think that the Jewish religion was a thing of the past. On the contrary, they argued that genuine Judaism is an authentic combination of religion and nationality. Indeed, they said that the Jews are both a religion and a people, and have always combined both sides of their identity. Attempts of assimilated Jews of one stripe or another to separate the Jewish Nation from the Jewish Religion are inauthentic, they argued, and this dichotomy could not hold water over time.

Religious Zionism has grown and developed in Israel since the founding of the state in 1948 and especially in the past 42 years, since the Six Day War of 1967. Not only

Orthodox Jews are “religious Zionists” today, but so are Reform and Conservative and Reconstructionist Jews, who have all joined the Zionist Movement since 1967 and who all have major institutions in Israel to this day. In other words, there has been a general trend to combine the religious and national parts of our identity as Jews among all Jewish religious groups (except for the ultra-orthodox groups, which are another story or the ultra-secular, who hardly exist any more) in contemporary Israel.

### **Zionism and Jewish Identity Today in Israel**

Without going into more Jewish history, the question now arises as to the nature of Zionism and Jewish Identity in Israel today. This is a complicated contemporary issue, which I cannot tackle comprehensively in this short reflection, but I will present my own analysis and perspective in a short and succinct manner.

First of all, it is important to state, that Israel has changed greatly during the years since the state was founded in 1948. New waves of aliyah (Jewish immigration to Israel) have helped Israel grow from a population of 600,000 people to a population of 7.5 million people today, 80% of whom are Jewish. With time, the idealism and socialism of the pioneering decades in the pre-state era and in the early years of the state, has dissipated greatly. Contemporary Western Culture—for good and for bad—has inhibited greatly the ability of non-religious Jewish Culture to compete in the free market of ideas and trends, especially for the younger generation. And, many decades of wars and “intifadas”—including a great deal of terrorism, especially suicide bombers-- have pushed the mainstream Jewish population to the right, with the feeling that the world is still out to get us via terrorism and wars that threaten to destroy the Jewish state, not to mention the possibility of a nuclear Iran which promises every day to wipe Israel off the map of the nations of the world.

In other words, the right has take over the center in Israeli political and cultural life. Perhaps the greatest irony is despite our great military and technological power, we still live with a Holocaust consciousness which reminds us that major elements in the world still seek our destruction. In this sense, we are not yet entirely free, even though we live in a land of freedom, in our own national home.

This brings me to the title of this reflection, i.e. the idea of a humanistic liberal understanding of Zionism. Is such a position still tenable in contemporary Israel?

My answer, of course, is yes. Let me explain.

Israel's founding document is our Declaration of Independence, published on May 14, 1948. It is an inspirational statement of the ideals on which this state and society are based. I quote below just a few paragraphs to give the reader some idea of the vision of what kind of state we are supposed to have here in Israel, according to our founding generation:

"THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

THE STATE OF ISRAEL is prepared to cooperate with the agencies and representatives of the United Nations in implementing the resolution of the General Assembly of the 29th November, 1947, and will take steps to bring about the economic union of the whole of Eretz-Israel.

WE APPEAL to the United Nations to assist the Jewish people in the building-up of its State and to receive the State of Israel into the comity of nations.

WE APPEAL - in the very midst of the onslaught launched against us now for months - to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions.

WE EXTEND our hand to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighborliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land. The State of Israel is prepared to do its share in a common effort for the advancement of the entire Middle East."

In many ways, all that is called for is a return to these basic values enshrined in our declaration of independence! Indeed, a Jewish organization of which I am a member, Rabbis for Human Rights, has written a new commentary on the Declaration of Independence to remind all Israeli citizens of the basic values upon which this state rests.<sup>7</sup>

But life is not so simple. We cannot simply go back to 1948! Too many wars and too much violence have occurred since then. And, with them, the development of two very different national narratives-- the Israeli Jewish one and the Palestinian Arab one. Sometimes I think that the only things they have in common are the dates!

For a long time, both sides denied the existence of the other. Until the Oslo accords in 1993, both sides did not officially recognize the existence of the other. The state of Israel refused to recognize the existence of a collective entity in the world now known as the Palestinian people; and the Palestinians refused to recognize the state of Israel as a legitimate state and referred to it as "the Zionist entity".

Ever since the mutual recognition of the Oslo Accords, we now recognize the Palestinians and they now recognize us. At least in principle! The Jewish state now recognizes the existence of the Palestinian People and their rights to self-determination, i.e. a state. And the Palestinians recognize the state of Israel and its right to secure and recognized boundaries. In this sense, the Oslo Accords signed on the White House lawn in Washington D.C. on September 13, 1993, represent a sea-change in the whole Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Yet, peace has eluded us for the past 16 years, since the signing of these accords. Instead, we have been witness to terror and counter-terror, the Second Lebanese War in summer 2006, rockets shot at our communities in the South, and Israeli military operations in Gaza last year.

Naturally, people on both sides have begun to despair of the possibility of peace in our region. Instead of normalization, we have separation. Instead of negotiations, we have walls and fences.

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<sup>7</sup> Tractate Independence was published in an experimental edition by RABBIS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS in 2008.

My answer to this—and the answer shared by many of my colleagues in Israel—is not to give up! We must resist despair with all of our strength and resources. Even if we can not solve all of the political problems at once, we must persevere via dialogue wherever possible.

### Towards the Future

My father, Rabbi Leon Kronish, of blessed memory, always used to respond to the simple question “how are you?” with a typically Jewish/Israeli answer: “*Yehiyeh tov*”—“it will be good”. The future will be better than the past.

He believed deeply in Israel’s mission as the fulfillment of messianic redemption. And so do I. I inherited this legacy, this optimism, from him.

And therefore I say that despite the current difficulties and obstacles in the political peace process—and there are many of them—I believe that the process will work itself out, and there will be a political solution, sooner or later, between Israel and the Palestinians (and all the Arab states).

There will be a two state solution: Israel and Palestine, side by side. This is the new unfolding reality coming about, albeit much too slowly and painfully.

And then what? Will we be prepared for the next steps? What will be needed in the future?

What will be needed is what I like to call “the other peace process” the educational, religious and spiritual one, to supplement the political one.

There will be a desperate need for a massive religious, spiritual, educational and psychological campaign to change the hearts and minds of the people on both sides, a serious and systematic set of programs which will educate the next generations about the existential needs to learn to live together.

This will not be quick, nor will it be easy. But it will soon become the educational imperative of the new era.

We will have no choice but to bring people together in large numbers to learn to live in peace:

- Rabbis, imams, priests and ministers, as the grass-roots community leaders,
- Teachers, educators, headmasters, assistant principals, curriculum writers,
- Youth movement leaders, informal educators, in a wide variety of settings, such as community centers, camps, and seminar centers,
- Women from all parts of the Palestinian and Jewish societies-- professionals as well as laypersons, educators and activists, housewives and mothers, community leaders and laypersons.

I believe that those of us currently engaged in interreligious dialogue and education in Israel and Palestine will have a major role to play in this people-to-people peace process for a long time to come. And, religious leaders and their followers from abroad—Jewish, Christian and Muslim -- will be called upon to help.

This will be a time not to divest of the possibilities of peace but to invest in peace-building programs in Israel and Palestine, and across borders, for the sake of all of God's children in the region.



**Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish:**

Founder and Director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI) since 1992, Ron Kronish is also a noted rabbi, educator, author, lecturer and speaker. He has lived in Jerusalem for the past 27 years, serving as Director of the Israel Office of the American Jewish Committee (1988-92), Director of Staff Development and later Co-Director for the Melitz Centers for Jewish Zionist Education (1979-88), and lecturer in education at Tel Aviv University (1982-86) and at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1979-81).