



A Response to Jay Harris

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A RESPONSE TO JAY HARRIS

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I am grateful for this opportunity to respond to Jay Harris' reading of the Israeli Declaration of Independence. By accentuating the implicit tensions between the multiple Zionisms represented in the document, Harris has rendered more starkly our shared North American political assumptions in surveying Zionist thought. Here, Harris has neglected to place some dominant Zionist ideological bases in their historical place as a product of fin-de-siecle Central Europe. What Harris characterizes as the product of diasporist thinking seems to me rather the product of the political ideas of a particular diaspora.

Harris notes that the writers of the declaration have incorporated "a central topos of much (not all) Zionist discourse, namely that all Jewish spiritual, religious and political creativity was nurtured by the land."

I would agree that this idea was dominant in Zionist ideology, and that it stemmed from the anti-rationalist Romantic nationalism that shaped Congress Zionism. The Jewish re-establishment in Palestine described in the third paragraph of the document mentions the building of "villages and towns," not the creation of cities like Tel Aviv. It's a sign of the origins of Zionism in 19th century German Romanticism.

Others have noted the relationship between Zionist love of the land and Romantic belief in the mystical connection between people and land.

There is a less obvious connection between the turn of the century rejection of classical liberalism and the historicism of Zionism. Harris necessarily misses this connection by placing Zionism among “revolutionary movements denying their revolutionary character.” Zionists did see their movement as revolutionary, a radical movement with universal implications.

Zionism has a place among the labor movements and radical reform movements at turn of the century whose growth was a direct response to the failure of classical liberalism to address major social problems.

Classical liberalism was predicated on the emancipation and enfranchisement of the individual from legal restrictions and discrimination. But Liberal politicians in most European countries had failed to even attempt to emancipate or enfranchise large portions of their population. Socialism was only one response to one failure, a response to the co-optation of parliamentary governments by owning-class interests. Marxist socialism made claims to being scientific; it emphasized the historical inevitability of revolution and the continuing conflict between classes. Ideologies of radical reform also emphasized that scientific inevitability made their reform the single key to universal prosperity. For example, pacifists developed economic theories showing that war caused poverty. Neo-Malthusians advocated birth control as the single solution to the problem of poverty. Feminists painted women’s participation in public life as the factor that would shift society from ignorance and corruption to enlightened social policies. Every bourgeois reform movement, Zionism included, had idealistic pretensions to solve a slew of social problems with a single solution.

Some Zionist thinkers also attempted to create in Jewish nationalism a universalist ideology. As early as Leon Pinsker’s *Autoemancipation*, Zionist thinkers wrote about the Jewish national need for a homeland as comparable to the needs of other nations. As Harris comments, the very status of Jews as a nation continues to be disputed. Zionist thinkers therefore had to prove first of all that Jews were a nation, and that all nations required autonomy within national states. The need to show that Jews had contributed to humanity was related to the Central European

conception of rights. The Western European Enlightenment conceived of a citizen as an individual who consented to be governed by the state. In Central and Eastern European states, where the majority of peasants down past the mid-19th century were completely disenfranchised, conceived of citizenship as a reward for service to the state. This concept of individual rights contributed to the Central and Eastern European ideas of national rights.

At the turn of the century, Jews were not the only ethnic group in Central and Eastern Europe striving for autonomy. Other ethnic groups within the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires, including Serbs, Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, and Czechs were attempting to establish themselves as separate nationalities. Even the Germans weren't completely sure in their self-definition. During the course of the 19th century, these groups had to establish for themselves whether their dialects were separate languages, where their historic homelands were, and whether they were part of the same nation as others who spoke their language or shared other cultural characteristics. Jews, like every other stateless ethnic group in Eastern and Central Europe, had to persuade themselves that they constituted a single national group. Some of these conflicts have not yet been resolved. How is it that Catholic and Protestant Hungarians are both identified as Hungarian, but that Catholic and Orthodox speakers of Serbo-Croatian are Croats and Serbs, respectively? Why do Austrians have a separate national identity from Germans? Looking at Zionism in this context, it become less remarkable that the authors of the Declaration used the language of the Jewish contribution to the world. This language is part of the need for national self-definition, and it conforms to Central European rhetoric.

Harris finds particularly appalling the mention of Jewish fighters against Nazism, because he sees the need to prove one's worth through combat and bloodshed as reprehensible. This, too, should be seen in the context of Central European ideas of the state. One of the greatest obstacles to women's emancipation in Central European societies was the common argument that women didn't serve in the military. Central European feminists, in Hungary for example, argued that mothers shed

blood for the state just like soldiers and that this service was the basis for their enfranchisement. In a state in which the privilege of citizenship rests on the contribution of the individual, service is paramount. Jewish emancipation had been predicated on military conscription and service in both in Austria-Hungary, Herzl's frame of reference, and in Germany, where Ahad Ha-Am edited his journal *Ha-Shiloach*.

I understand that it's ultimately horribly ironic that Jews were arguing for their national rights based on the same German ideas of service to the state that the Nazis they fought had exploited. But Zionism was shaped to a great extent by the same cultural factors that made these ideas palatable to Germans under Nazism. These cultural contexts were so well established that the authors of the Declaration would not have seen any connection between their own desire to serve militarily in a national cause and the same ethic in their enemies. As a North American raised with the idea of natural right and legitimacy of the state resting on the consent of the governed, I too can hear the dissonance in the Zionist use of this argument.

Most historians today accept the premise that no historical movement is inevitable and every historical act has its origins in individual human decisions. Zionist thought was predicated on the idea that persecution of Jews was the inescapable consequence of their status as a minority in the Diaspora.. Jews were among the many peoples who needed homelands because the existence of nations without their homelands was inherently insecure. This was Pinsker's explanation of anti-Semitism in the wake of the pogroms of 1881. It is not only, as Harris asserts, that the Shoah is the culmination of Jewish dread of powerlessness. Long before the Shoah, Zionists espoused the belief that Jews could have no future in the Diaspora. They wrote of a Jewish state as a historical inevitability. I frankly can't see the tension that Harris does between the historical justification of Jewish national connection to the land and the failure of living as a minority in the Diaspora. These ideas were paired in Zionist thinking for more than sixty years before the Declaration was written. It is the very fact that Jews have no homeland that makes their diaspora existence untenable.

When Harris decries the failure of Zionists to insist “that they [Jews] should enjoy the same rights as everyone else...by virtue of their humanity” he ignores that Zionism developed in states where this was not the dominant conception of human rights. To deplore the failure of Zionists to have this conception of human rights assumes that the ideas of our own historical moment are eternal and universal. The American Declaration of Independence was based largely on the writings of Thomas Paine and other rationalistic deists. It is a document of the political realization of the ideology that shaped its writer, Thomas Jefferson. Clearly the ideals of the American Declaration of Independence were imperfectly realized, but they have formed the political expectations of people raised in the orbit of the United States. The Israeli Declaration of Independence, as Jay Harris notes, was written by several men under many ideological influences. These writers did not have a strong ideology of natural right; rather, they were responding to concepts of the relationship between individuals and their nation current at the birth of Zionist theories.