




## A Response to Jay Harris

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## A RESPONSE TO JAY HARRIS

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Jay Harris' reading of the Israeli Declaration of Independence in vol. 7 of *Textual Reasoning* captures a central and animating tension of the Zionist project. Notwithstanding the movement's (and many of the Declaration's signatories') commitment to a radical restructuring of Jewish life and thought, Zionism rested on a complex of ideas and sensibilities rooted in the diaspora. Both the Herzlian quest for "normalization" and the Ahad Ha-amian drive for Hebrew cultural revival prescribed innovation, but naturally reflected the formative European context out of which their initiators emerged. For example, Herzl's aspirations to exit Europe and create a Jewish state (though not necessarily in Palestine) were unmistakably molded by his own vision of a bourgeois, European-style democracy. So too, with the shift in Zionism's center of gravity to Palestine after the First World War, the prevailing socialist and nationalist discourses in the Yishuv bore clear traces of Europe. In short, Zionism remained a movement of Jewish national liberation born and bred in Europe.

Jay Harris acknowledges as much when he observes that "thoroughly nationalist Jews have absorbed the political thinking imposed on them by the hopeless conditions of modern European politics." While I concur with him about the vectors of influence shaping Zionism, I do not share

the often withering judgment streaking through his analysis with its curious division between commendable and contemptible Jews. On one side of the divide stand a pair of strange bedfellows: the Zionist apologist and the diasporist (perhaps one of Jay's conversation partners in a recent Textual Reasoning debate?), both of whom ignobly prostrate themselves before Gentile authority. On the other side stands the true Jewish nationalist, informed by a healthy dose of Realpolitik, who refuses to submit to the humiliating exercise of historical self-justification in staking out a claim to Zionism. This figure, like Zionism itself, is born, and not created by circumstance or context.

The problem, Jay suggests, is that too few Zionists fall into the latter camp. All too often, Zionists have eschewed the natural right to nationhood that is justly theirs. Instead, they have tended to succumb, in a moment of apparent weakness, to the unbecoming act of historical justification. Jay uncovers this disturbing trend in the Declaration itself; the better part of the document (10 of 19 paragraphs), he notes, contains historical arguments staking out the Zionist claim to a state. Among the categories of argument of this variety are: a) triumphalist claims which herald the signal contributions of the Jews to the world (e.g., the Bible); b) quasi- historical claims which assert more specifically that Jewish nationalism is embarked on a mission civilisatrice (as a bulkhead of "progress" in the Middle East); and c) persecutionist claims which recall Jewish valor in times of ominous threat. Jay points out correctly that these arguments contain a measure of exaggeration "and in some cases distortions," as, for instance, in the paragraph extolling the Yishuv's heroic struggle against Nazism. But this is not his main concern. What occupies and agitates him is that the signatories of the Israeli declaration have not "succeeded in emancipating themselves from the self-destructive notion that Jews must justify themselves in terms of the benefits that accrue to others from their existence." He suggests on several occasions that this "degrading line of thought" is hardly different from "the pathetic arguments of German diasporists," whom he presents as the most egregious and undignified offenders of the code of Jewish national honor.

There are several interrelated themes in this criticism which merit our attention. The first is Jay's apparent disdain for the "degrading line of thought" of early Zionists, as well as for self-doubts they manifested along the way. It is as if Zionists must never waver in recognizing the virtue of their cause. Acts of historical justification represent an unacceptable waning of confidence—and, in some way (never fully explained), invalidate the natural right to nationhood. The ideal Zionist type, for Jay, resists the historicizing impulse; he has no need for it, for he is fully formed at birth, and requires no ideological reorientation or self-fashioning.

We would do well to recall that Zionism was not a creation *ex nihilo*, but rather an ideology rooted in late- nineteenth century European history. Its adherents were almost entirely of European origin. To assume that they could agitate on its behalf without recalling the deeply ingrained historical links and traumas that guided them is both psychologically and historically misguided. In the lifetime of a first-generation Zionist—for example, David Ben-Gurion—it was impossible to expunge the recent diaspora past altogether, to erase the memory of David Gruen from Plonsk. Self-doubts necessarily abounded. Even on the night of November 29, 1947, at a moment of apparent triumph for Zionism, David Ben-Gurion found it difficult to fathom that his dream was close to realization. While others danced outside of his hotel near the Dead Sea, Ben-Gurion confided to his daughter his own morbid fears about impending war: "Who knows if some of those dancing here and now will not fall?" And shortly after the declaration of Israel's independence, Ben-Gurion committed to his diary a line reminiscent of an earlier Zionist luminary, Ahad Ha-am, after the First Zionist Congress: "In the country, there is jubilation and joy—and again I am a mourner among revelers, as on the 29th of November." (Ben-Gurion, *Pa'ame medinah*, 503) Are these doubts to be seen as a lack of inner fortitude or typical diaspora cowardice? Or should we not see Ben-Gurion and other fellows Zionists as works in progress, as historical actors undergoing a momentous transition in self-definition? Should we not consider the Israeli Declaration too as a text demarcating the transition of a group of dispersed individuals into a coherent national body?

Given that the Israeli Declaration's signatories were first-generation Zionists, it is not surprising that they needed to remind themselves of the historical (as well as historic) grounds on which their movement stood. How else would they be able to lay claim to a territory which was not native to them and whose current inhabitants were engaged in mortal battle to retain it for themselves? Zionists required a recourse to history in order to weave together a narrative fabric for the collective life they had chosen to live. There are, of course, disturbing aspects, even insoluble tensions, in that narrative framing, particularly revolving around the place of non-Jews in a Jewish state. These tensions exist, and will become increasingly burdensome in the next fifty years of Israeli history. But to expect first-generation Zionists to overcome the need for an embracing historical narrative, replete with both triumphalist and persecutionist motifs, is to deny them the very substance of their national identity.

It is also, ironically, a recipe for continued Zionist exceptionalism. Jay seems to want to avoid an exceptionalist path for Zionism, particularly in analyzing the kind of argumentation which its adepts used in advancing the cause of Israel's independence. He suggests that the historically rooted argument, as against the argument from natural law, was somehow abnormal and/or unbecoming. And yet, the basic assumption of this critique—that Zionist recourse to historical justifications was exceptional—is faulty. Such recourse in fact typified the modern nationalist quest. By now, generations of scholars of nationalism—from Hans Kohn to Boyd Shafer to Eric Hobsbawm—have shown that activists of incipient nationalist movements unfailingly devote their energies to the construction of a past, often an ancient past, to validate their existence. Like activists of other nationalist movements, Zionists rummaged around the ancient past for models of inspiration. They evinced a new and powerful interest in the Bible, no better evidenced than by David Ben-Gurion himself who regularly assembled leading scholars for study sessions. They also discovered in the ancient past sage politicians and brave warriors, ethical prophets and ascetic pietists, who could fortify their national will in moments of self-doubt.

What did distinguish Zionism from most other nationalist movements—indeed what led Trevor-Roper to call it the “last, least typical” case of European nationalism—was not the reliance on an invented past, but rather the degree of imagination required. Lacking a proximate national territory, and groping to revive the Hebrew language, Zionists, were, if anything, engaged in a remarkable project of self-fashioning, aiming to transport themselves from what they regarded as the ignominy of galut to the joy of Zion. Zionists, soon to become Israelis, had to convince themselves and the world that they too deserved a nation, and state, of their own. They had to recall, as did the framers of the Israeli Declaration, the age-old allure of Zion, the travails of dispersion, and the recent efforts to seize control of Jewish national destiny.

They were hardly alone among incipient nationalists in following this course. Jay finds it “depressing” that Jews had not asserted their collective right to exist purely “by virtue of their humanity.” But few nationalist groups ever did. To take only one example, consider the American Declaration of Independence. The text drafted by Thomas Jefferson and approved by the Second Continental Congress in 1776 as the American Declaration of Independence is, in fact, similar to the Israeli declaration in a number of important regards. Hence, after the well-known opening sentences in which the American Declaration announces that “all men are created equal,” the text shifts to a recitation of the “history of repeated injuries and usurpation” committed by King George. The list of such abuses is quite long and occupies at least half of the Declaration. What might have prompted its inclusion? As Garry Wills has noted, until the very last days, prominent signatories of the Declaration “held out the promise...that relations (with the British) could be both restored and improved.” Here too, self-doubt characterized a set of founding fathers, particularly as they contemplated severing all ties with their mother country. Consequently, the text they produced, much like the Israeli Declaration, was an exercise in self-legitimation, “intended, in part, as a propaganda document to rally the common people of the colonies and the liberal groups abroad to the support of the revolutionary movement.”

(Readings in American Government, eds. Macdonald / Webb / Lewis / Strauss, 30).

Even a cursory reading of the American declaration makes clear that historical arguments were an important mechanism for overcoming lingering doubts and legitimating the cause of independence among the colonists on the eve of the Revolution. It reminds us that the need to legitimate one's cause for both internal and external consumption was not unique to the Jews. Such legitimation is central to the task of defining a nation, which in Renan's famous phrase, is but a "daily plebiscite" of the people. While there may be abnormal features about Zionism, the act of self-legitimation, through recourse to history, was surely not one of them.

Jay Harris' discontent with this rather normal aspect of Zionism issues from his own curious standard of normalization. On his view, it seems that a truly "normal" nationalist is one who asserts a natural right to national existence without regard—in fact, in explicit disregard—for the very historical conditions that shaped him/her. Strangely, Jay links this disregard for historical contingency, characteristic of (his view) of a natural rights philosophy, to an unapologetic stance of Realpolitik. Here, we have another odd pairing. Usually, arguments based on Realpolitik are precisely opposed to arguments based on natural rights. But for Jay Harris, the natural right of the Jewish nationalist entitles one not to timeless and universal principles of truth or happiness, but to a life lived like everyone else's, liberated from the domain of exceptionalism which Jews presumably inhabited hitherto. This amounts to the natural right to a most quotidian politics.

Apart from the vagueness of such a standard, we must ask in what respect natural rights can or do obtain for groups. "All natural right doctrines," Leo Strauss declares, "claim that the fundamentals of justice are, in principle, accessible to man as man"—and not, we emphasize, to nation as nation. To the extent that rights accrue to nations, Strauss further notes, they have frequently been designated as "historical rights." (Strauss, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, 104) But this is exactly the language that Jay seems to disavow ("historical" vs. "natural") notwithstanding the fact that most contemporary philosophers and

theorists who discuss group rights seem to have little use for natural rights discourse. It is not clear what instrumental value or moral imperative Jay sees in asserting a natural group right. Is it not the case that a national group's rights emerge from—indeed, are constructed out of—a rich web of historical circumstances. Is not a nation, in its historical and cultural development, a by-product of history? And what does a natural right accord a nation? Political sovereignty? Cultural autonomy? Some other form of self-determination?

These questions are difficult ones that obviously can not be answered here. Needless to say, the stakes involved in addressing them are quite high. They concern not only the individual nation's quest for self-expression, but the way in which different nations interact with one another, and address each other's own claims to rights. Jay Harris' view that nations possess natural rights, seemingly focused on political sovereignty, seems at once absolutist and brittle. Does not such a natural, even God-given, right crowd out competing claims to political sovereignty? How does one validate or balance competing assertions of natural rights by different groups?

These final questions arise not only out of Jay's commentary, but out of the very text that inspired his commentary. Notwithstanding the self-doubts that plagued its authors, the Israeli Declaration of Independence itself spoke of "the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State." Here is precisely the kind of two-fisted claim—to natural rights and political normalization—that Jay Harris favors, but found all too absent in the Israeli Declaration. But while Jay might celebrate its appearance, I remain troubled. On one hand, it is easy enough to understand this statement in context, as the effort of a diaspora group that had recently survived a major collective trauma to assert its place among the fraternity of nations. On the other, the continued articulation of Zionism's "natural right" in the current political climate seems only to up the ante of exclusivism—and, concomitantly, dull the powers of empathy that lead to fruitful dialogue. In this respect, it may well have been reasonable for Zionists in 1948 to justify their collective existence on the basis of a natural right. It seems a



good deal less so for Israelis, and their putative friends, to do so a half-century later.