

No Peace, Ever?

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sample translation

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THE FAILURE OF ZIONISM

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The Zionist movement was officially founded in 1897. Its goal, according to the programme which was adopted at the first Zionist congress in Basel ‘to create a home for the Jewish people in Palestine that is officially recognised and secured under public law’. In the mind of the Viennese journalist Theodor Herzl, founder of this organisation and author of the programmatic book *The Jewish State* (1896), this state should be the ultimate answer to the ‘Jewish question’ – not the emancipation of the Jews and their equality of status in the countries of the diaspora, but ‘self-emancipation’ as a nation in their own historical territory.

It was not until the late 18th century that anyone could have conceived of regarding the Jews as a people, indeed a nation, rather than a religious community. At that time, around 90 per cent of Jews lived in Europe, the continent that since the beginning of the 19th century had been increasingly aspiring to think along more national lines politically. From that point on, therefore, the relationship of the Jews to the idea of the nation was on the agenda. Progressives of the era, Jews as well as non-Jews, believed that although Jews were members of a different religion or confession, they were part of the nation in which they lived. Correspondingly, Jews in the nation state could claim equal rights, which in turn meant that Jewish emancipation and equal rights would solve the historic ‘Jewish question’.

And yet, even as the first modern nation was coming into being – France in the wake of the Revolution – many non-Jews wanted to segregate Jews as a separate nation because supposedly they were maintaining a state within the state. This viewpoint spread to other nations, providing new, modern arguments for the hatred of the Jews. In the very places where progressive, liberal forces introduced Jewish emancipation (in Germany since 1869),

those hostile to Jews strove to reverse this equality, introducing and implementing instead a process of exclusion on an ethnocentric basis.

This Jew-hatred, which sought to reverse Jewish emancipation, persuaded not only Theodor Herzl to look for an alternative solution to the insecurity of the diaspora's existence and the perceived fragility of emancipation. Other Jews too, in view of the radicalisation of Jew-hatred (called antisemitism from 1879), had given up hope that emancipation could be a solution to the Jewish question. In other words, they were aiming at a new type of 'solution to the Jewish question'. As pogroms, blood libel trials and antisemitic parties became widespread phenomena in the last third of the 19th century, a new type of 'solution' seemed to be particularly urgent. As far as Herzl and the Zionists were concerned, Jews would not be safe from antisemitism, pogroms and discrimination until they lived in their own state. Herzl even expected that 'antisemitism [would come] to a standstill immediately and everywhere' the moment the Zionist plan started to be rolled out. The very start of the emigration to Palestine, he claimed, 'is the end of antisemitism'.¹

According to this prognosis, the Zionist solution would be the optimal escape from adversity, not only for the Jews who'd fled to the Jewish state, but for Jews as a whole. It would usher in a win-win situation. Antisemitism would vanish in the diaspora, while in the Jewish state the safety of the Jews as Jews would be guaranteed.

More than five decades lie Between Herzl's programmatic book and the foundation of the state of Israel, a period which supposedly bears out Herzl's vision, at least in part. Antisemitism was rampant in all nation states after the First World War; after 30 January 1933 it became official government policy in Germany, culminating in the 'final solution of the Jewish question', that's to say the extermination of around six million European Jews. The foundation of the state of Israel three years after the end of the Shoah (Holocaust) was

¹ The Herzl quotations are taken from his book *The Jewish State* (1896).

thus seen – not only in Zionist circles – as the ultimate response to antisemitism and the absolute antithesis to the sheer helplessness of the diaspora Jews before the Nazi era, but especially during it.

Fact or myth – ever since the foundation of the Jewish state it has been no secret that the existence of Jews there has been no less vulnerable than that of diaspora Jews. Wars, military operations, terrorist attacks – all of these have cost countless human lives. Thanks to the dissemination Israeli narrative, however, it was possible to sustain the myth that ‘the Jew feels safest in Israel’. Until the pogrom of 7 October 2023. This time it was more than ‘just’ a suicide bomber in a packed Jewish restaurant or a shower of rockets from Iraq, Gaza or Lebanon on towns and villages in the heart of Israel. This time Israeli civilians were victims of a pogrom, the like of which had hitherto only been experienced in the two-thousand-year history of the diaspora Jews.

What the Israeli national poet Hayim Nahman Bialik described in his poem ‘In the City of Slaughter’ were his impressions as a member of a commission investigating the 1903 pogrom that took place in Kishinev in Tsarist Russia. The tone of the poem is brutal and unequivocal:

*You will want to scream and dig up graves
And bellow like an ox tied to the slaughter bench –
But you stand there as silently as the gravestones.
Go, look at them, there they are, the martyrs,
There they lie slaughtered like the calves,
And you have no tears for them, nor no compensation.
I came here, mortal remains,
To beg for forgiveness: forgive me.*

Forgive your god, you who are abused without end,

Forgive me your bitter, dark lives,

Forgive me your far more bitter, darker death.²

The original message was clear – Zionism emerged to prevent such disasters in the land of the Jews.

Since 7 October this poem has taken on a completely different meaning – it describes precisely what happened in the *kibbutzim* and the towns along the border with Gaza in the independent, proud and well-fortified Jewish state, where no pogrom should ever have been able to take place. The catastrophe of 7 October is even worse than the surprise attack by Egypt and Syria on Israel on 6 October 1973, precisely fifty years earlier. This time it wasn't a military operation with regular soldiers but terrorists attacking, humiliating, murdering or abducting mostly civilians. There cannot be a more glaring contrast to what the founding idea of the Jewish state had promised.

The contrast is even greater because no settlements in the occupied West Bank were attacked, but a stretch of land which is undisputedly Israeli territory, and moreover *kibbutzim* were targeted. The *kibbutz*, the model social experiment of Zionism, is still regarded today as the ideal of social justice and of Zionism's resilience. To strike at the heart of Zionism you have to attack the *kibbutzim*. Which is exactly what happened on 7 October 2023. The victims, *kibbutzniks*, tend politically to support an accommodation with the Palestinians, and amongst those killed were some who selflessly sought to help their neighbours in Gaza.

But that is not all. The photographs and videos that the Hamas terrorists took during the attack and then spread via the media and social networks – an orgy of the most brutal violence, the slaughter of babies, the rape of women, the harassment of older people – all of

² Hayim Nahman Bialik's poem 'In the City of Slaughter'. Translated from a German translation.

this created associations with the fate of the Jews in the Second World War, during the Shoah. Because Israel, according to the way it perceived and presented itself, had come about to exclude the possibility of a second Shoah, these images showing the humiliation of Jewish civilians and soldiers were seen as a warning sign; at that moment the Zionist state, Israel, was unable to honour the promise of Zionism. This led automatically to the question: if a pogrom of Jews could take place in the heart of Israel, events reminiscent of mediaeval pogroms and the Shoah, then not only had the Zionist project definitively failed, but hadn't its claim to be the ultimate 'solution to the Jewish question' also lost its validity for good?

This is not a rhetorical question. Some are trying to make certain people, certain institutions – the intelligence services, the military or even the government – responsible for the failure, thereby saving not only the politicians' reputations, but more importantly the myth of a Zionist solution to the Jewish question. The debate is in its early phases and the experience of the 1973 Yom Kippur catastrophe shows how long such a debate can go on and how deep the traces it leaves can be.