Beyond the State: Reclaiming Zionism's Expansive Mission

Noam Pianko

In 1982, Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, one of the most prominent Reform theologians of his generation and founding editor of *Sh'ma* Magazine, sounded an alarm to American Zionists. He condemned the American Jewish response to the massacre of hundreds of Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. Citing reports that the IDF bore at least partial responsibility for the killings by Lebanese forces, Borowitz wrote:

"We must now be rid of our old ideology which subordinated all of Judaism to ethnicity. Judaism does not need a political entity in the Land of Israel to survive worldwide. A State of Israel that can conspire with Phalangist thugs is not a proper response to the Holocaust. And we are not one people if that means condoning blatantly immoral Israeli acts."

Borowitz was not a fringe figure. He was a Zionist and a respected American Jewish intellectual. Yet in these few lines, he laid out three principles that challenged the easy equation between Jewish identity, Zionism and unconditional support for the State of Israel.

First, support for a Jewish state is *conditional*. Zionism, he argued, is about renewing Jewish national life across the globe. A homeland in Israel anchors that project, but the existence of a state is not the ultimate test of Zionism's success. In fact, the state can just as easily undermine the movement's goals.

Second, American Jews have a duty to speak out. When Israeli leaders act in ways that violate Jewish values or clash with their own political commitments, diaspora Jews should not remain silent. Their role is not only to stand with Israel, but also to hold Israel accountable to the moral compass of global Jewry.

Third, the Holocaust is not a blank check. It cannot be invoked endlessly to shield Israel from criticism or to justify actions against Palestinians.

Borowitz's critique belongs to a largely forgotten current of American Zionism. Leading Zionist figures like Henrietta Szold, Mordecai Kaplan, Louis Brandeis, and Abba Hillel Silver all insisted that Zionism meant more than sovereignty. They envisioned diaspora Jews as equal partners in building a vibrant global Jewish national culture.

But what Borowitz voiced in 1982 has, in the decades since, been cast outside the bounds of acceptable Zionist discourse. Positions once considered central to Zionist debate are now often branded as anti-Zionism, or worse, antisemitism.

One of the forces contributing to the narrowing definition of Zionism is the effort to expand the working definition of Antisemitism's relationship with Zionism. Take, for example, frameworks such as the "3Ds of Antisemitism" test—Demonization, Double Standards, Delegitimization. This criteria for identifying antisemitism popularized only two decades ago has defined criticism of Israel so expansively that Borowitz himself could be accused of failing it. His moral outrage at Sabra and Shatila might today be read as delegitimizing Jewish self-determination, demonizing Israeli leaders, or applying standards to Israel that other states escape (including several in the early 80s that committed far graver human rights violations). By these measures, a historic Zionist voice would be judged antisemitic.

While addressing antisemitism is an essential priority, we must also remain attentive to how these efforts redefine Zionism. As antizionism becomes increasingly entangled with antisemitism, Zionism has hardened into a litmus test: Do you stand with the State of Israel, opposing antisemitic efforts to undermine its legitimacy? Or do you deny Israel's right to exist, a position rooted in prejudice against Jews. This binary flattens a once-dynamic movement into a rigid political loyalty oath.

To re-engage American Jews with Zionism, we must temper efforts to limit its definition to the inherent right of the Jewish people to statehood. This can be achieved by reviving the expansive Zionist traditions that once openly debated the relationship between nationhood and statehood.

Zionism should be first and foremost about reimagining Jewish collective life, not about galvanizing unified political support. It should invite serious critique of Israel—including challenges to the very defensibility of a Jewish state—when such critique is grounded in genuine concern for Jews and Jewish life, rather than dismiss such critique as inherently anti-Jewish. And if Zionism is to confront antisemitism with integrity, it must do so without deploying Jewish suffering to stifle debate. To prohibit disagreement is to betray

the very creativity and ethical rigor that made Zionism compelling to many American Jews in the first place.

The paradox is this: the path to renewing Zionism runs through its past. Its strength has always come from its willingness to wrestle with difficult questions, to engage dissent, and to measure itself by its contributions to Jewish life around the world—not by uncritical allegiance to a state. Only by reclaiming this eclipsed tradition can Zionism remain vital in a fractured Jewish present.

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