



Choosing Israel

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When Israel was created, its purpose was clear. It was a home for those who had nowhere else to go. The land already held Jewish communities: families who had maintained continuous residence for centuries, alongside waves of immigrants who had arrived since the 1880s as part of early Zionist dreams. But the new state's most urgent mission was providing refuge for those fleeing catastrophe. Survivors of the Holocaust, Jews expelled from their homes in Arab lands, and families escaping persecution across Europe and the Middle East arrived in massive numbers during Israel's first decade. For these refugees, Israel was not a choice but the only choice.

Today, many Jews face a different reality. Millions live in places where Jewish communities have taken root and flourished, even as we remain vigilant about rising antisemitism and the fragility that history has taught us to never take for granted. While some Jews worldwide still face genuine threats requiring urgent refuge, many others find themselves in the position of choosing Israel not from immediate necessity but from conviction and connection. This shift presents both opportunity and responsibility. What does it mean to choose Israel when that choice springs from values and vision rather than survival alone?

To answer this, we must wrestle with Zionism's heart. Theodor Herzl envisioned a state where Jews could live with dignity. Ahad Ha'am argued that Israel must become a spiritual center radiating light to Jewish communities worldwide. From its inception, Zionism held two promises: safety and moral purpose. If we take these founding visions seriously, then Zionism cannot be separated from the ethical demands of Jewish life. Jewish tradition teaches that societies are measured by how they treat their most vulnerable members. Abraham Joshua Heschel spent his life arguing that faith without moral action is empty. Zionism without moral clarity risks becoming hollow nationalism.

Israel today grapples with genuine security threats alongside the daily work of building a diverse society. The state faces terrorism while navigating relationships between Jewish and Arab citizens, religious and secular communities, new immigrants and established families. These challenges cannot be solved by good intentions alone, yet neither can they excuse abandoning ethical principles.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks taught that authentic faith creates space for difference. In Israel, this principle plays out concretely: hospitals where Jewish and Arab doctors treat patients regardless of background, environmental organizations where citizens collaborate across ethnic lines, courts that have protected minority rights even when politically unpopular. The Israeli Declaration of Independence promised a state based on “freedom, justice, and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel.” This means creating institutions that serve all citizens equally, pursuing security while preserving human dignity, and remembering that the tradition demanding Jewish safety also demands Jewish responsibility toward others.

This vision requires acknowledging uncomfortable truths. Palestinian families have experienced displacement. Israeli policies have sometimes fallen short of stated values. Security measures have imposed hardships on innocent people. These realities do not negate Israel’s legitimacy, but they demand honest reckoning and course correction.

What lies within Zionism’s legitimate boundaries today? Any vision that upholds both Jewish self-determination and universal human dignity belongs. This includes religious Zionists who see the land as covenant, secular Zionists who emphasize democratic values, and progressive Zionists who prioritize social justice. What falls outside these boundaries? Ideologies that treat non-Jews as inherently inferior, that reject democratic norms, or that abandon moral accountability in pursuit of power.

Rejuvenating Zionism requires concrete action. Jewish educational institutions must teach Israel’s complexities alongside its achievements. Young Jews need programs that connect them to Israeli peers working for social change. Diaspora communities should support Israeli organizations promoting coexistence and democracy. Zionist movements must model the pluralism they claim to champion.

The challenge is ensuring tomorrow’s Israel remains worthy of being chosen not only by those who need refuge, but by those who seek to live their values in the world. A Zionism disconnected from Jewish ethics becomes indistinguishable from ordinary nationalism. The true measure of contemporary Zionism is whether Israel can embody the values that have sustained Jewish communities through centuries: justice that extends beyond tribal boundaries, compassion that includes the stranger, and courage to remain self-critical under pressure. This is Zionism worth choosing. Not as an escape from moral responsibility, but as its fullest expression.

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