# Six Different Types of Zionist Thought

We're curious…

What does it mean to be a Zionist? What does the term Zionism really mean? According to the late Israeli writer A.B. Yehoshua, it means many different things. And he ended up defining Zionism as a common platform rather than an exclusive ideology.

Writing in this Haaretz piece, Yehoshua explained that Zionism contains "various and even contradictory social and political ideologies. It therefore cannot in itself be considered an independent ideology."

But this has always been the case — diversity and spirited debate have always been central to Zionism.

For example, should we focus on Jewish survival or Jewish renewal? Is the purpose of the Jewish state to provide a safe haven for the Jewish people, or is it to renew the Jewish people and be a light unto the nations?

In his book, "The Zionist Ideas: Visions for the Jewish Homeland — Then, Now, Tomorrow," Gil Troy puts forth six schools of Zionist thought: Political, Labor, Revisionist, Religious, Cultural and Diaspora Zionism.

These different schools of thought often clashed with each other. "The early Zionist movement was indeed a many-splendored thing: a rollicking conversation synthesizing Judaism, nationalism, liberalism, idealism, rationalism, socialism, and capitalism," Troy wrote.

The idea of creating a Jewish state united them: "Thinkers in all six intellectual streams viewed the Jews as a people, Israel as its homeland, and the state as having an essential role in saving Jews and Judaism," Troy explained.

Let's uncover, excavate and explore these six schools of thought and the range of Zionist ideas that continue to shape the conversation today.

(Editor's note: This article is part one in a two-part series — stay tuned for part two on Religious, Cultural and Diaspora Zionism with student prompts.)

Political Zionism
Political Zionism was led by Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau in Russia. It stressed the importance of political action and the need to create a Jewish homeland in the land of Israel.

According to Troy, this stream of Zionism had three basic tenets:

First, the Jews were a people (not just a religion) and shared national ties. “The principle of nationality which dominated thought and sentiment in Europe” had awakened the Jewish people’s “sense of their own identity,” Max Nordau explained in 1902.

“It has taught them to regard their unique qualities as values and has given them a passionate desire for independence,” he added.

Second, the Jews needed a state because of antisemitism, pogroms (violent riots against them) and other problems. “The world denounces the Jews resoundingly,” Theodor Herzl wrote in 1896 in “The Jewish State.” He continued:

“We have honestly endeavored everywhere to merge ourselves into the social life of surrounding communities and to preserve the faith of our fathers. We are not permitted to do so.

In vain we are loyal patriots, our loyalty in some places running to extremes…in vain do we strive to increase the fame of our native land in science and art, or her wealth by trade and commerce. In countries where we have lived for centuries, we are still denounced as strangers.”

About 15 years before that, Leon Pinsker made a similar point: “Since the Jew is nowhere at home, nowhere regarded as a native, he remains an alien everywhere.”

The Jews must “build a secure home, end our endless life of wandering and rise to the dignity of a nation, in our own eyes and in the eyes of the world,” Pinsker concluded.

Finally, Jews must return to their ancient homeland, the land of Israel. In 1903 at the Sixth Zionist Congress, Herzl presented a plan to establish a temporary Jewish state in East Africa. He felt that the Jews needed to come up with a solution — any solution — to combat the rampant antisemitism of the day.

The Uganda Plan was rejected at the Seventh Zionist Congress in 1905. The other Zionist leaders would not give up their dreams to return the Jewish people to their ancestral homeland, even in the face of incessant, violent antisemitism.

Labor Zionism

Labor Zionists “treated Political Zionism as the start, not the end of the journey,” Troy wrote. They “envisioned a Jewish working class settling in Palestine and constructing a progressive Jewish society.”

“Labor Zionists did not just want to solve the Jewish Problem, or fashion a strong and self-sufficient New Jew. They wanted to save the world by creating a new model for humanity…to bring alive a realistic socialism,” Troy added.

One of the best-known expressions of Labor Zionism was the kibbutz. The kibbutz began as a communal farm where everyone shared everything. “Kibbutzniks” (as kibbutz members were called) worked the land and shared the responsibilities of running and protecting the community.

They shared profits, if they had any. Kibbutzniks did everything together. They dressed alike, ate the same food together in dining halls, and lived in simple, similar-looking concrete blocks. Originally, even the children lived together, away from their parents in communal children’s houses.

Labor Zionists believed that through working the land, the Jewish people would not only rebuild themselves — they would also create an egalitarian, cooperative society.

“The Jewish people will participate in the great historical movement of present-day humanity only when it will have its own fatherland,” Moses Hess, one of the founders of Labor Zionism, wrote in 1862. “Every Jew…ought to cling to the cause and labor for the regeneration of Israel.”

“Our pioneers [imagined] that when Jews would return to their homeland…they would make a better society…founded on the concepts of justice and equality,” said Golda Meir, Israel’s fourth prime minister and one of the founders of Mapai, the Labor Party of the Land of Israel, in 1930.

This strain of Zionism dominated for the first 30 years of Israel’s existence until Menachem Begin brought the Likud party to power in Israel, ushering in a new era in Israeli politics.

Revisionist Zionism
Founded by Ze’ev Jabotinsky in 1925, Revisionist Zionism advocated a “revision” of the Zionist movement’s official policy (under the leadership of Chaim Weizmann and David Ben-Gurion).

“The goal of Zionism is: Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel) as a single state on both sides of the Jordan River,” the slogan of the Revisionist Zionists read. What set this group apart from the other Zionists?

First, they insisted on the Jewish people’s right to sovereignty over the entire biblical land of Israel. To achieve this goal, they advocated for rapid, mass Jewish immigration to Palestine. This was in contrast to Weizmann who called for a more gradual settlement of the land.

Second, leading up to the Holocaust, the Revisionists also recognized the urgency of the situation and the immediate need to save as many Jews as possible. “Eliminate the Diaspora, or the Diaspora will surely eliminate you,” Jabotinsky warned bluntly.

Third, the Revisionists fundamentally mistrusted the British authorities in Palestine. While other Zionist leaders wanted to work with the British who (they believed) would eventually transfer power to the Jews, the Revisionists believed that the Jews would have to fight and win their own sovereignty. And they did not think it was going to be given to them by the British.

Finally, the Revisionists opposed the Labor Zionists' socialist vision for the Jewish state. They argued that there must be room for other ideologies in a future Jewish state.

"In opposition to the [Labor Zionist] workers, who claimed that they exclusively were the nation's pioneers — which is how most of the Zionist public perceived them — Jabotinsky presented the petite bourgeoisie as another claimant to the crown of implementers of Zionism," historian Anita Shapira explained.

After Jabotinsky's death, Menachem Begin (who had been a leader in Jabotinsky's youth movement, called Betar) came to embody Revisionist Zionism.

Like his mentor, Begin believed that all of the biblical land of Israel belongs to the people of Israel and the West Bank should be included. When asked about the annexation of the West Bank, he would get agitated and say: "You annex foreign land, not your own country."

But in 1979, Prime Minister Begin made a compromise with his own principles and agreed that Israel would withdraw all its settlements in the Sinai in exchange for peace with Egypt. Defending his decision to his fellow colleagues in the Knesset, he said:

"Yes there are difficulties in peace…there are. There are pains in peace…there are. There are victims for peace…there are. All of these are preferred to the victims of war…Our deepest desire is peace."

We're curious…
Is Zionism about fulfilling a divine promise to the ancient Israelites, creating a vibrant Jewish culture, or ensuring the safety of Jews around the world?

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Religious Zionism
Religious Zionists developed the religious case for establishing a Jewish state. To understand this school of thought, you need to understand the moment in Jewish history when it began.

The situation looked something like this: With antisemitism, misery and disappointment growing throughout Europe, some young Jews decided to take action. They insisted that the time to return home and build a Jewish nation — with their own hands — had arrived.

These Zionist chalutzim — the secular pioneers who settled the land of Israel in the early 1900s — were also fiercely anti-religious. They didn't observe Shabbat or keep Kosher, and they saw Jewish law as antiquated.

Many religious Jews opposed the efforts of these self-proclaimed “New Jews.” First, they disagreed with their secular ideology and vision for the new Jewish state. Would secular society replace traditional Jewish life in this new state? Would religious Jews be welcome there?

Second, many religious Jews believed that it was forbidden to establish a Jewish state in the land of Israel before the coming of the Messiah. They believed that Zionism violated the “Three Oaths” found in the Talmud, in which the Jews were sworn not to reclaim the Land of Israel by force.

Religious Zionism developed in this context. One of the first leaders of this school of thought was Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines, who argued that “It is the duty and obligation of every Jew to join” the Zionist movement.

Reines made his case to his fellow religious Jews on two grounds. First, Zionism was a movement to rescue Jews whose lives were in danger. Jews had never refrained from working together in such situations in the past, he pointed out.

Second, Reines argued that Torah was at the center of Zionism. Establishing a Jewish state was a means of achieving religious objectives. It was only in Israel that the Jewish people could observe all of the mitzvot (commandments).

While Reines took a more pragmatic approach to the antisemitism of his day, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (commonly known as Rav Kook) offered a more messianic, spiritual version of religious Zionism. For him, Zionism was the beginning of a messianic redemption.

Rav Kook viewed the land of Israel as intrinsically valuable and holy. He spoke romantically about how the land was inseparable from “the soul of the Jewish people.”

“Eretz Yisra’el is part of the very essence of our nationhood; it is bound organically to its very life and inner being,” Rav Kook wrote in the early 1900s.

He further argued that it was the only place where Jews could develop to their full potential. “Jewish original creativity, whether in the realm of ideas or in the arena of daily life and action, is impossible except in Eretz Yisrael,” Rav Kook wrote.

Although the secular Zionist pioneers did not share this religious theology, Rav Kook saw them as critical partners in rebuilding the land and the Jewish people.

“We need to bind together all Jews, from the oldest rabbi of Jerusalem to the youngest laborer of Poriah,” he said in 1913.

Both Reines and Rav Kook reminded their fellow Zionist leaders that the rise of the political Zionist movement wasn’t the first chapter of the story — it was actually the culmination of a much longer one starting in the Torah.

They were always aware of the direct line between the divine promise of the land to the ancient Israelites, and the modern Zionist movement. After two thousand years spent in exile, Zionism was fulfilling that ancient promise.

Cultural Zionism

While Political, Labor, Revisionist and Religious Zionists prioritized the need for a Jewish state (albeit with different visions of what that state would look like), Cultural Zionists focused on a different starting point.

For Cultural Zionists, what the Jewish people really needed was a regeneration of national Jewish culture, and this had to precede the creation of a political state. They still wanted a Jewish state in the future, but they had a different immediate goal.

Cultural Zionists were much more interested in building a national Jewish culture. They envisioned a Jewish world in Israel and the Diaspora that was learned in Jewish history and Jewish texts, fluent in Hebrew, and producing literature, music and art.

They sought a cultural revival of the entire Jewish people and they didn't feel a political state was necessary to achieve that. They also harbored doubts that this crazy idea to establish a Jewish state would succeed.

Many Cultural Zionists also warned their colleagues of the difficulties that would come with establishing a state in the land of Israel. For example, seeing the impending conflict with the Arabs, Martin Buber argued that there must be Arab-Jewish reconciliation before a state was established.

Rather than a political state, Cultural Zionists wanted to create a new Jewish spiritual center in the land of Israel. They hoped that this spiritual and cultural "hub" would inspire the rest of the Jewish world.

"From this center, the spirit of Judaism will radiate to the great circumference, to all the communities of the Diaspora, to inspire them with new life and to preserve the overall unity of our people," Ahad Ha'am, the founder of this school of thought, imagined in 1897.

"When our national culture in Palestine has attained that level, we may be confident that it will produce men [and women] in the land of Israel itself who will be able, at a favorable moment, to establish a State there — one which will be not merely a state of Jews but a really Jewish state," he added.

(This was a subtle dig at Political Zionist leader Theodor Herzl, whose work "Der Judenstaat" literally means "The State of the Jews" in German.)

Meanwhile, in 1932, the poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik expressed the idea of Cultural Zionism this way: “Everything that is created in the Land of Israel by Jews becomes culture.”

According to historian Gil Troy, “Most Zionists rejected [Ahad Ha’am’s] views as elitist and defeatist, especially in light of Theodor Herzl’s vision of political rebirth” and the rampant antisemitism of the day.

“Still, many Jews in Palestine embraced this ‘spiritual’ or ‘cultural’ Zionism, understanding that a Jewish state without a rich spiritual and cultural life would be like a person without a soul.”

One of the most prominent Cultural Zionists was Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who led the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language after it was essentially dead for 2,000 years.

Ben-Yehuda believed the Jewish people could not unite or thrive without a common language (specifically, Hebrew). Jews “cannot become a living nation without returning to their ancestral language” and using that language “in everyday discourse…in all facets of life,” he wrote.

Ben-Yehuda and his wife Dvora established the world’s first strictly Hebrew-speaking household in almost 2,000 years. Then, after his wife passed away, he and his second wife Hemda created the first modern Hebrew dictionary, helping to kick off the revival of the ancient language.

Diaspora Zionism
Diaspora Zionists reconciled patriotism to the different countries they called home with Jewish nationalism.

They expanded the definition of a “Zionist” to include those who supported the idea of Jewish nationalism. To be a Zionist, they insisted, you didn’t necessarily need to be a pioneer in the land of Israel, building the Jewish homeland.

You could also be a proud Jewish citizen of America, Australia, Britain or another country — with no intentions of ever living in the land of Israel — who supported and believed in the goals of Zionism. You could be a Jew living in the Diaspora who wanted to ensure that Jews around the world would have a homeland.

In America, Jewish leaders like former U.S. Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis and Hadassah founder Henrietta Szold insisted that there was no contradiction between being a proud American and a proud Zionist.

“Let no American imagine that Zionism is inconsistent with Patriotism,” Brandeis declared in 1915. “Multiple loyalties are objectionable only if they are inconsistent.”

Taking this one step further, Brandeis argued that Zionism actually made Jewish Americans better citizens.

“Every Irish American who contributed toward advancing home rule was a better man and a better American for the sacrifice he made. Every American Jew who aids in advancing the Jewish settlement in Palestine…will likewise be a better man and a better American for doing so,” he explained.

Meanwhile, Sir John Monash, the president of the Australian Zionist Federation, called on his fellow Jews in Australia to join the Zionist cause.

“We have joined our fellow Jews all over the world in the task of building up the Jewish Homeland,” he declared in 1928. “As Jews living in Australia…we have to do our share in rebuilding the land of Israel and reviving the cultural and spiritual center of Judaism.”

Meanwhile, Baltimore-born Henrietta Szold wrote that a Jewish state would not only bring “immediate blessing” to Jews in distress (who would have a refuge): it would also benefit Jews who chose to live in other countries.

“Those [of us who remain] in a happy, prosperous country will be free to draw spiritual nourishment from a center dominated wholly by Jewish traditions and the Jewish ideals of universal peace,” she imagined in 1915.