

# Zionism and Jewish identity

Earlier this century, Bundists and Zionists competed for the political allegiance of Jewish communities. Later events turned the Jewish world upside down, but the search for a collective Jewish identity continues, says John Bunzl.

The "old" discussion between Bundism and Zionism was mainly a discussion between two different perspectives of a struggle for a *collective* Jewish destiny. It was *not* a debate between Zionism and assimilation. It was a dispute around *where* such a struggle should take place. Those who advocated the diaspora-centred perspective argued that their opponents neglected the day to day issues of the Jewish masses and took no interest in opposing antisemitism. They thought that political transformations in their diaspora societies would lead to freedom and equality for all. Consequently the struggle for such a goal would have to be a *common* (Jewish and non-Jewish) one. The "territorialists", advocating the concentration of the Jewish people on a piece of land, favoured strategies that would *isolate* Jewish masses from their environment and lead them to a special form of migration: the colonisation of Palestine, the forming of a majority and ultimately a Jewish state there.

The Holocaust and the emergence of the state of Israel seemed to have decided this essentially Eastern-European debate in favour of the "territorialists". But these events have actually *enlarged* the scope of the question and drawn most Jewish people on a worldwide scale into it. The uneasiness most secular and progressive Jews feel about Zionism and Israel today derives primarily from the fact that the "Jewish State" has somehow taken it upon itself to "solve" our problem too; that its mere existence

signifies a constant appeal for support and/or immigration; that most Jews are grateful to it, achieve their identity through it and consider it a compensation for unspeakable suffering — as well as a possible refuge. On the other hand the state of Israel claims to speak for "the Jews" — and the world tends to identify Jews everywhere with Israel. The peculiar behaviour of this state is itself related to the task of "solving the Jewish question" and the "ingathering of the exiles". The state of Israel is, by its own definition, an instrument for this process. Simultaneously it is a process of landgrabbing and expropriation of the Palestinians. Jewish and non-Jewish perceptions of Israel often do not recognize this interrelationship and demand moral standards drawn from the *European* experience of Jewish suffering. These perceptions themselves result from conflating European experience and Middle East realities and from misunderstanding unavoidable mechanisms of the process of Zionist colonisation.

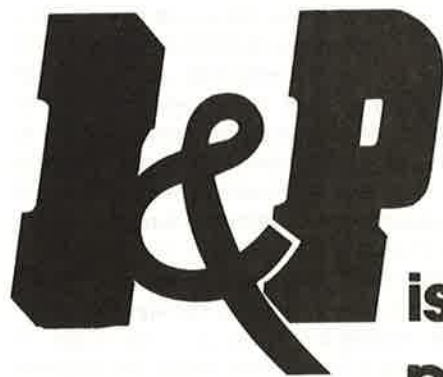
Israel's tutelage over the Jewish communities in the diaspora derives from the subjective function of Israel for Jewish consciousness outside Israel on the one hand, and from the needs of this state on the other. These needs are ambiguous. On the one hand, immigrants/settlers should be recruited, on the other hand, pressure groups should be maintained in the respective countries. Recruitment can be based either on the attraction of Israel, or on the "discom-

fort" of the diaspora. But present conditions in Israel are hardly very attractive for most diaspora Jews.

It becomes more and more obvious that the conditions of existence are very different, even opposite, between Israel and the diaspora. While Zionist Israel is compelled to use force in order to maintain itself in Palestine, the Jewish communities around the world have a fundamental interest in the pluralist/tolerant character of the societies they live in. Contrary to these interests, Israeli tutelage increasingly takes the form of imposing absurd chauvinist thinking on these communities. Therefore most communities experience internal dissatisfaction *under* the surface. Although it would be wrong to attribute to Israel the capability of manipulating antisemitic tendencies around the world, some Israeli forces are definitely interested in conditions that would lead to mass immigration to Israel. All these circumstances lead to important controversies among Jews. We must formulate an alternative Jewish perspective.

Zionism and Bundism were forms of collective Jewish self-activity — attempts to influence the course of history by independent conscious action. *This* aspect should be upheld — against assimilatory and other illusions. Our political orientation should be to integrate Jewish emancipatory aspirations into a more general liberation struggle and to work against the illusion that the Jews could retreat to one corner of the earth.

This implies taking an interest in the Jewish community in Israel/Palestine *and* in a Jewish emancipatory perspective outside; to see the Israeli Jews as one important community among other Jewish communities and to help those who work against oppression and brutalisation there. This is a very difficult position to take nowadays and a mental burden. Hannah Arendt describes it as choosing the position of a pariah, not only vis-à-vis gentile society, but also vis-à-vis official Jewish society. This situation is a burden not only for our socio-political but also for our individual/personal relations, because they are overloaded by the task of providing us with the sense of identity and belonging so difficult to achieve elsewhere. It is a very serious challenge to perceive identity, belonging and the concept of "homeland" as something that does not yet exist; as something that has to be created by human efforts — and to see participation in such efforts as a central meaning of life as Jews and as human beings. □



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