

Auschwitz or Sinai? Reorienting Our Vision of Zionism

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President Obama declared many important and hard truths in his June 4th speech at Cairo University.

There are many aspects of the speech that will be analyzed and debated.

At the outset it is important to note with gratitude that President Obama talked about America's relationship with Israel and called that bond “unbreakable”.

In spite of this statement there was one note that was worrisome, even dangerous. Here is the part of the speech I am referring to.

“[T]he aspiration for a Jewish homeland is rooted in a tragic history that cannot be denied. Around the world, the Jewish people were persecuted for centuries, and anti-Semitism in Europe culminated in an unprecedented Holocaust. “

President Obama was not the first to view a Jewish homeland primarily as a shelter for Jews.

Moses Hess wrote in 1862, [T]he Jews in exile, at least the majority of them, cannot devote themselves successfully to productive labor: in the first place, because they lack the most necessary condition - an ancestral soil; and, secondly, because they cannot assimilate with the peoples among whom they live without being untrue to their national religion and tradition.

Leo Pinsker wrote, twenty years later, *We need nothing but a large piece of land for our poor brothers, a piece of land which shall remain our property, from which no foreign master can expel us.*

If President Obama is right and the only reason for the legitimacy of the State of Israel is to serve as the mouse-hole of the Jewish people then we must ask ourselves a serious question. With millions of Jews living in safety and security all over the world do we have a right to demand a homeland for ourselves. Even if there are parts of the world not entirely safe for Jews, certainly the large majority of Jews live in peace in their “host” countries.

The truth is that President Obama is wrong in his assertion. He is wrong on three counts – Historic, religious and moral.

He is wrong historically because Zionism predates the Holocaust. Modern Zionism, some argue began in 1897 with the First Zionist Congress. The historical relationship between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel spans the milenia. Using the history of Jewish suffering as the sole reason why Jews have a claim to the Land of Israel is speaking only a partial truth and comes as a surprise considering that the President said that in his speech he was going to follow the Koranic teaching of “*Be conscious of God and speak always the truth.*”

President Obama was wrong religiously as well when he ignored the religious ties that the Jewish people have with the land of Israel. Israel is the place where the most positive and complete fulfillment of Judaism is possible. It is the place, as recorded in out Torah where our ancestors walked. It is the pace where according to the Talmud we can achieve purification form our sis. It is the place where, according to Nachmanides, our Mitzvah observance is real. To skip this point at a time when so many Muslims deny the ancient and spiritual connection between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel strikes me as missed opportunity.

Most importantly, President Obama's narrative is wrong morally.

By basing the Jewish claim to the land of Israel of the long and noble history of Jewish suffering, President Obama is defining the Jewish State in terms of what was as opposed to what it is; as a measure of history that was imposed on the Jewish people instead of by what the Jewish people created for themselves.

By resorting to the mouse-hole approach to Israel's legitimacy, essentially President Obama is denying Israel's voice. According to this view, Israel is heard as the voice of the weak and needy people screaming for help, and the gracious victim saved by the goodwill of the nations declaring their gratitude.

Israel is much more than that and much more can be heard coming from her.

The Jewish State is not Yad Vashem. The Jewish State is the hospitals, army bases, schools, universities and orphanages in Israel. The Jewish State is not a monument of suffering, but rather a testimony to democracy, egalitarianism and religious freedom. Israel is not legitimate because of past suffering, it is legitimate because it has what to offer other nations in terms of how to absorb different cultures and how to build one nation with a healthy respect for difference.

The danger of drawing a straight line between suffering and Statehood is pointed out by the Torah in the Egypt narrative. After the Jews left Egypt they did not go directly to Israel, they made a stop on the way. They stopped at Sinai. Stopping at Sinai was meant to create an authentic Jewish narrative. At Sinai we received our constitution in the form of the Torah. The Torah created a unique vision for the Jewish people, one based on uniquely Jewish ideas, dreams and responsibilities. Stopping at Sinai ended the Egypt narrative that was imposed on us and started the unique Jewish narrative.

But there's a catch. If we really disagree with the President and believe what I just said, if we really believe that Israel is not only about safety but rather about creating a place where a Jew can live and develop as a Jew, if we buy the arguments of Torah and the Talmud, then we should all be rushing to live there, now.

I don't speak of those who have medical or financial or family reasons and the like for remaining in the diaspora, but for the rest of us, is there any question as to where we belong?

The president's speech should not be a simple opportunity to discuss what he said and

what he did not say, rather, it should be a challenge to us, all of us, a chance for us to think. If we don't accept his narrative, if we do not view Israel as an escape hatch, then let us ask ourselves what narrative we do accept, and put it into practice.

*The first part of the title for this talk, Auschwitz or Sinai?, and the notion of creating a new paradigm for understanding Zionism, comes from an article written by Rabbi David Hartman in a collection called: A Heart of Many Rooms. I take the Sinai paradigm in a bit of a different direction.

**I am grateful to my colleague Mordechai Torczyner for bringing the quotes from Moses Hess and Leo Pinsker to my attention and for so poignantly suggesting that this discussion also be about what narrative we accept.