

David Novak. *Zionism and Judaism: A New Theory*. Cambridge University Press 2015. 272 pp. \$99.99 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781107099951).

David Novak has produced a ‘new theory of Zionism’: Jews are commanded in the Torah to make their homeland in Israel, and so Jews are religiously required to return to Israel for no other reason than that it is their religious obligation to establish a polity in Israel.

One may ask, not just what's new about that, but also why do we need a theory of Zionism in this day and age when Israel has been an Independent Jewish State since 1948. Who needs a theory of Zionism, other than one that is historical, sociological, and psychological? Who needs a *philosophical* theory of Zionism? Zionism was never a philosophical theory: it was and is still a political movement similar to other national liberation movements. Moreover, it was and still is a successful national liberation movement where Jews are again leaving Europe, in particular France, escaping the latest wave of European anti-Semitism.

So, where is the philosophical need for a new theory, even an old theory, of Zionism? Going back a step: this question of the philosophical need for a theory of Zionism raises the prior question: What question could a philosophical theory of Zionism address? We know the practical political question answered by the political national liberation movement of Zionism—the question answered by all nationalist liberation movements, even the current Palestinian movement for an Arab-Moslem State within the occupied territories and Gaza: how can ‘we’ attain national liberation—*emancipation*? The main answers have been having a national homeland, or, for International Marxists, emancipating all peoples from the hegemony of global capitalism, or for Internationalist Pacifists, dissolving States and establishing a genuine World Government. That is, there have been different movements striving for national liberation; but, *nationalist* liberation movements have dominated.

The question then is: what philosophical question could Zionism address as a **philosophical** theory? It is hard, *impossible*, to say since Zionism is not a philosophical theory, but a political movement. One could argue that a so-called philosophical theory of Zionism is based on a ‘category mistake’ or is a ‘pseudo-question’, mixing the categories of political philosophy with actual historical political movements. However, political and social movements often are based on a mix of philosophical and political theories, and emancipatory nationalist movements are based on a mix or better a tangle of theories of national and individual rights. So, too Zionism as a political movement was born from and developed through a tangle of philosophical theories both of the Enlightenment philosophies and also of later versions of Marxist philosophies with their varieties of approaches to egalitarian and communal forms of work, property sharing, shared family responsibilities, and democratic decision making and power distribution. In other words, Zionism as a political and social movement, was influenced by various philosophical ideas and used various philosophical ideas for articulating its mission or purpose, and for rationalizing its activities as the means required to achieve the mission of Zionism: giving the Jewish nation a homeland and State of its own as its national right of *national self-determination*. The philosophical question, then, is in this respect about the **purpose** of Zionism and is this: Do Jews as a nation require a homeland and a State for national self-determination? For instance, not all nations require a separate State for themselves in their *homeland*—there may be two nations with one homeland and one State; or two homelands and one State; or dispersed homelands in one State; or indeterminate multiple homelands in several States. In the end, the political movement of Zionism is **shaped**, at the most, by philosophical political answers to the philosophical question of how Jews can achieve national self-determination. For instance, the traditional answer

is that the Jewish nation requires a single homeland and single State for its national self-determination. A single State and homeland is required because dispersal as a small people has proven to disallow Jewish national self-determination.

Here enters David Novak's book. David Novak drops the traditional philosophical background for Zionism and employs an alternate philosophical background steeped in classical philosophy. So too, the philosophical question that at most shaped the historical political movement of Zionism is replaced with an alternate philosophical question steeped in classical philosophy—similar to the move by Leo Strauss in general political philosophy. The philosophical question is: **Who should rule?** The answer for Novak is: **God**. No earthly sovereign is the legitimate ruler of humanity, speaking universally, nor of the Jewish people or nation, speaking from the particular. The State where God is the ultimate Sovereign is a *Theocracy*: not rule by clerics, but rule by God and the God-given laws found in the Bible (See chapters 4, 6, and 7).

If one's warning lights for *reactionary fundamentalist religious crackpot type of thinking* start to blink, turn the blinkers off. David Novak interprets Theocracy and Biblical law very differently from fundamentalists. Indeed, David Novak makes pointed criticisms that puncture the thinking of religious zealots about Zionism, both the extremist religious anti-Zionists and those religious Zionists who think of Zionism and the State of Israel in eschatological terms similar to their Christian fundamentalist counterparts (see chapter 8, and read it first, if you are afraid your warning lights about a religious-theological approach to philosophy is even indicating a minimal signal of *not-even-bed-time-sleepless-night-reading*).

Now that we have the theological frame for David Novak's approach to philosophy, we are close to the time to discuss the critical value of Novak's book. There is one unexpected aspect in David Novak's theological turn that requires pointing out, so that we are able to have the complete context for discussing the critical value of Novak's book. David Novak argues for a turn or more exactly a *return* to Spinoza's theological-political approach to political philosophy (See chapter 2). Indeed, Novak's discussion of Spinoza's political philosophy opens up a new perspective for viewing Spinoza's contribution to the philosophical discussion of democracy.

Novak's interpretation of Spinoza as a theocratic-democrat and proto-Zionist, encapsulates the core argument for Novak's new theory of Zionism where all forms of current Zionism fail to philosophically validate a Jewish democratic State where all Jews are required to live in order to fully actualize the Jewish way of life: 'What would make a state of Jews...a truly Jewish state...? Contrary to the views of his [Spinoza's] secularist admirers..., Spinoza seemed to be convinced that a reestablished Jewish state could be "Jewish" only if its character was "theocratic" in the sense that God and His law...must be sovereign. But contrary to the views of religio-nationalist Zionists...Spinoza was very much opposed to any clerical class having governing power in this state. And, contrary to the views of what we now call "ultra-orthodox" Jews..., Spinoza was clearly not in favor of waiting for a super-natural Messiah to reestablish the Jewish state' (46).

But what exactly is a 'theocratic' state—according to Novak and Spinoza? The ancient Israelite theocratic state 'was truly democratic insofar as all its citizens enjoyed the highest degree of equality possible. Why? *Because they were all unequal before God equally*. Therefore, no one had more access to God the Sovereign than anybody else. All had equal access to the law regarded as divine, and all were to be equally under divine authority alone' (39-40, *italics* in original).

From the perspective of a renewal of Spinoza's theological-political approach to political philosophy, Novak's theory of Zionism is new in that it requires a form of Zionism not yet achieved. This theological-political philosophy is based on a theocratic rule where only God is the Sovereign. Israel as a democracy is part way there because a theocratic State requires a democratic approach to interpreting and applying God's Law. The hinge point on which Novak's theological-philosophical Zionism turns is a Biblical quote. The quote is from Numbers 33:53 (see chapter 6, 179). In the end, the practical question to ask, regardless of Biblical and traditional Biblical scholarly support for a theological-philosophical approach to Zionism is this: **Is there anything new in Novak's approach for Zionism as it now functions in the current State of Israel?** I will leave that question open for the readers of this book to discuss. One point to consider for the discussion of this question is that the current state of the State of Israel is democratic without theocracy and does enjoin all Jews to return to Israel. How then does Novak's 'new theory of Zionism' contribute to a better self-understanding of current Israeli society? In other words, does Novak's theory of Zionism philosophically rationalize how Israelis currently think of their own society? Here is how Israelis now think of their own society, according to the Israeli philosopher and social critic, Joseph Agassi: 'This is the received opinion, the opinion that the Israeli individual, as well as the State of Israel, of necessity belongs to the Jewish people and that there is no freedom of choice in this matter, since it is the duty of all members of the Jewish people to settle in Israel, whereas the duty of those already settled there is first and foremost, to maintain the possibility that non-Israeli Jews will migrate to Israel one day' (Joseph Agassi, *Liberal Nationalism for Israel: Towards an Israeli National Identity*. Gefen Publishing House, 1999, 42).

Does Novak's 'new theory of Zionism' practically differ from 'the received opinion'? If Novak's theory of Zionism does not differ from the 'received opinion', then it may entrench the failure of Israelis coming to a deeper and improved self-understanding as attempted by Agassi and other internal Israeli social critics. An improved critical self-understanding, according to Agassi and other Israeli social critics, is required for Israelis to come to terms with their own social and political internal problems.

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