

Nationalism: The Curse of Mankind?

Rabbi Aaron Starr

The sun is shining. At the Starr family home, a large American flag flies as a statement of gratitude to and celebration of this country, and especially for the men and women who labor and fight for its safety and success.

At our home, an Israeli flag similarly flies, recently placed there by my wife Rebecca. We are grateful for the State of Israel, and especially for the men and women who labor and fight for its safety and success. We celebrate the State of Israel, and all the good that it represents for our people and for our world. We are nourished by Israel and by Israelis: our spiritual gas tanks replenished by their Torah -- by its Torah. As a descendent of Holocaust survivors, I find comfort in Israel's presence – its strength and its willingness to use that strength to protect Jews. We *shep nachas* (feel pride) at its technological prowess: from making a desert bloom through becoming the Start-Up Nation. We long to visit Israel again and, who knows, maybe one day even to live at least part of our time in the State of Israel.

At this time of conflict internal and external, one might ask: is it a Jewish value to support Israel? Is it a Jewish value to support America?

For many, the founding of America and the founding of the State of Israel were tied intricately into the messianic ideal. With the biblical messages and imagery as their guides, the founders of each nation sought to build a country in which justice and compassion flourished alongside prosperity and safety. Of course, the messianic ideal sets a divinely chosen sovereign – a descendent of King David – to helm the kingdom. In both Israel and America, we are “stuck” (blessedly so, I would argue) with the imperfections of a democracy. Therefore, neither Israel nor America has yet experienced the messianic ideal; both countries are projects in formation. Both countries fall short of their potential.

At the same time, both countries continue to transform the world for the better, with freedom of religion for all, freedom of assembly for all, freedom of speech for all, and so much more. Both countries are safe for Jews, too, which is something that we should never take for granted. Well, both countries are relatively safe, given the recent antisemitic attacks in L.A. and elsewhere in the U.S., and despite the violence against Jewish sites in Israel in recent days.

So is it a Jewish value to support Israel? Is it a Jewish value to support America?

It is a *mitzvah* (a commandment from God) to love your neighbor, but “neighbor” does not necessarily mean the person who lives next to you and it certainly does not mean you must *love* your neighbor! Rather, when the Torah offers this stipulation, it is commanding us with a sense of obligation toward our fellow Jews. Period. We are obligated to care for our fellow Jews as we would care for ourselves.

We Jews – whether we live in Michigan or in Tel Aviv or in the furthest corner of another country – are family. We must keep each other physically safe and spiritually safe. Like family, we do not need to like each other or to agree with each other. However, we must take care of each other; protect each other; stand by each other when one or the other feels threatened.

At the same time, the Torah also stipulates that we are to love the stranger, which is to say we must also care for the non-Jews living among us. We are not obligated to care for the non-Jews living among us in the same way we care for our fellow Jews or for ourselves, but we must nevertheless care for them. God commands us to create a society in which justice and fairness prevail for all. Moreover, as our rabbis remind us, the more stable a society in which we live, the better it is for the Jews. The more the Gentile world sees Jews caring for non-Jews, the better it is for the Jews.

In addition, and perhaps more importantly, God commands us to remember: the more we Jews care for others in the ways in which we wished we were cared for when we were powerless or outside of our national home, the more God rewards us too by keeping us safe, free, and prosperous. Not just for Jews but also for all who live alongside Jews, we must pursue justice. Not just for Jews but also for all who live alongside Jews, we must offer compassion. Not just for Jews but also for all who live alongside Jews, we must facilitate prosperity. Not just for Jews but also for all who live alongside Jews, we must seek to preserve life. Remember, we were strangers once too.

Nowhere in Torah, in the Tanach (Hebrew Bible), or in the rabbinic writings is nationalism mandated. Rather, we are obligated to the Jewish family and we are obligated to the strangers living among us. We are compelled to celebrate when the nations we love practice the values we uphold. We are compelled to speak up when the nations we love fail to achieve that which God expects of us.

We can love Israel and we can love America while admitting their imperfections and striving to repair that which is broken. I will say it clearly: I love Israel and I love America. I also acknowledge they are not perfect.

I recently came across these words from Israeli writer Amos Oz (1939-2018). On one hand, given the imperfections of our nations, we should temper our nationalism and we must become more open to constructive criticisms. On the other hand, while rabbinical students question Israel in public letters, while Palestinian nationalists attack Jews on the streets of Los Angeles, and while BLM falsely labels Israel an apartheid state in tweets and elsewhere, I will continue to fly my flags. I will continue with my moderate nationalism: loving my countries while seeking to improve them.

I pray for Jews and for Gentiles alike: May the One who makes peace in the heavens above, grant true and last peace to all of us on earth below, and may it be a Shabbat shalom for us all. Amen.

Amos Oz, *In the Land of Israel*

I think that the nation-state is a tool, an instrument, that is necessary for a return to Zion, but I am not enamored of this instrument. The idea of the nation-state is, in my eyes, "*goyim naches*" (a gentile's delight). I would be more than happy to live in a world composed of dozens of civilizations, each developing in accordance with its own internal rhythm, all cross-pollinating one another, without anyone emerging as a nation-state: no flag, no emblem, no passport, no anthem. No nothing. Only spiritual civilizations tied somehow to their lands, without the tools of statehood and without the instruments of war.

But the Jewish people has already staged a long running one-man show of that sort. The international audience sometimes applauded, sometimes threw stones, and occasionally slaughtered the actor. No one joined us; no one copied the model the Jews were forced to sustain for two thousand years, the model of civilization without the "tools of statehood." For me, this drama ended with the murder of Europe's Jews by Hitler. And I am forced to take it upon myself to play the "game of nations," with all the tools of statehood, even though it causes me to feel (as George Steiner put it) like an old man in a kindergarten. To play the game with an emblem, and a flag and a passport and an army, and even war, provided that such war is an absolute existential necessity. I accept those rules of the game because existence without the tools of statehood is a matter of mortal danger, but I accept them only up to this point. To take pride in these tools of statehood? To worship these toys? To crow about them? Not I. If we must maintain these tools, including the instruments of death, it must be not only with glee but with wisdom as well. I would say with no glee at all, only with wisdom – and with caution. Nationalism itself is, in my eyes, the curse of mankind.

Do you agree: is nationalism the curse of mankind?