

Helyn B. Reich Scholarship – Zionism Essay

My relationship to my own Jewish tradition could be described as ‘troubled’ for some time. I wrestled with the idea of conversion to Christianity for years, as I was sure at the age of 16 that I knew everything about our 3,000-year-old tradition. Though I never took the final step away from my tradition, I certainly did not feel comfortable with my identity for most of my younger years.

It was only after having discovered the work of Martin Buber and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in college through a Professor and a close Jewish friend that I began to reconsider a tradition and home base that I tried so hard to distance myself from. Their writings on God and community were life changing for sure, but nothing drew me more to their work than when they spoke of Eretz Yisrael. There is something so special about their wrestling with the concept of Zionism in their own time and context. Martin Buber, with such incredible sincerity, worked out what Zionism meant in TERMS of the 2,000-year-old ethical and mystical tradition of Judaism. Soloveitchik saw the return to Israel in messianic terms, and when we get to know his writings in depth, we can truly sympathize with this branch of Zionist thinking, no matter what our political or religious leanings might be within the movement.

It was from these two great Jewish minds that a new heart for Israel and the Jewish people was made for me, and this was the background and backbone of my first experience there. My own experience of ‘return’ could aptly be described in the closing sentence of Martin Buber’s classic “I and Thou”: “At the God-side of the event, whose world-side is called return, is called redemption”. Simply put, when I finally said goodbye to the Israeli soldiers on the trip, to Jerusalem, to the western wall, to the guitar in the hostel that I stayed in in Jerusalem for 5

extra days after my birthright trip, I understood that my hardships and questioning of my Jewish tradition leading to this experience had been redeemed upon my return to Israel. I understood that in order for there to be return, we have to stray, only so that we can find our way back with something deeper than what we had started with.

What is Zionism, to me? Sure, it is a chance for us to look and act like a modern people with a professional army and iPhones and skyscrapers and even criminals on our streets. But surely, that wasn't what our struggle was all for. After all, we are the eternal people. Rather, looking and acting modern is simply a shell that holds something more essential about our nature. While I can't pretend to know what the core and essence our 3,000-year-old tradition is, one thing I do know about Zionism, though, is that at its core is the conviction that we are not done yet, our mission to the world as the Jewish people remains unfinished. Zionism, in other words, is the "Not Yet" that is one of the key pillars of modern Judaism. In the eyes of a modern sage like Martin Buber or Rabbi Soloveitchik, "not yet" has the world been redeemed, "not yet" has it been made a place where our G-d can reside. So long as we remain strong and committed to our mission, we can make a state of the Jewish people as strong, flourishing, and peaceful as it has ever been. That, to me, is the essence of Zionism.