

What *Is* In a Word? A Historic-Linguistic Look at Zionism

Jack Holden Rosenberg
Israel Seminar
16 December, 2025

Introduction

Zionism has failed. I write not of a political, social, or cultural failure, but of a linguistic one. Zionism, the term, has failed. According to functional linguistics, the purpose of language is to communicate meaning.¹ All communication exists with the purpose of transmitting meaning; as such, when the utterance of a term does not effectively transmit the speaker's meaning, the term is unsuccessful and exhibitiv of "communicative failure".² Such failures vary in cause; the failure of Zionism is three-fold: pragmatic failure, semantic drift, and semantic opacity.

Pragmatic failure exists when the originator (i.e. the person doing the speaking) does not effectively communicate their meaning to their fellow interlocutor.³ The issue can be as simple as defining the misunderstood term to an unknowing receiver (pragmalinguistic failure) or as complex as the receiver disagreeing with the originator's definition of their utterance (sociopragmatic failure).⁴ This is the difference between simply not knowing a term and asking for its definition, and inherently disagreeing with the basis of the definition being used. In the case of Zionism, I posit that the failure is sociopragmatic: There is not a confusion with *what is meant by Zionism*; rather, *there exist variant meanings*, all being indicated by the same term: Zionism.

The core of the sociopragmatic failure of Zionism, then, stems from semantic drift: the process by which the definition of a term changes over time, eventually leaving its earlier meaning obsolete. However, as the new term takes hold and the old dwindles, there is a period called "polysemy", in which both definitions are recognized and valid.⁵ Of semantic drift, there is the subtype of "narrowing", in which a term's definition specifies from a broader umbrella of meanings to a pointed, singular one.⁶ I believe we are in a period of polysemy where Zionism is simultaneously referred to in its original status, as well as a myriad of competing new definitions. Initially, to my mind, Zionism referred generally to a "new Jewish national consciousness", in which post-enlightenment Jews began to conceptualize of themselves as a nation, particularly with an eye toward reunion in ארץ ישראל.⁷ Now, however, Zionism is best described a la Amos Oz's conception: Zionism is the surname that unites a family of distinct belief individuals (e.g. Political Zionism, Labor Zionism, Religious Zionism, etc.)⁸ As such, Zionism does not describe one general ideology as at its outset, but an assortment of specific

¹ Robert D. van Valin, "Functional Linguistics," The Handbook of Linguistics, March 11, 2017, 141–57, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119072256.ch8>.

² Rezeda Dilshatovna Shakirova et al., "Communicative Failures and Their Causes as a Result of Unsuccessful Communication," International Journal of Engineering; Technology 7, no. 4.38 (December 3, 2018): 469, <https://doi.org/10.14419/ijet.v7i4.38.24606>.

³ Jenny Thomas, "Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure," Applied Linguistics 4, no. 2 (February 1, 1983): 91–112, <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/4.2.91>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Catherine Anderson et al., "14.6 Semantic Change," essay, in Essentials of Linguistics, 2nd ed. (eCampusOntario, 2022).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Shlomo Avineri, The Making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2017).

⁸ Nadine Epstein and Amos Oz, At home with Amos Oz, other, *Moment Magazine*, 2008.

movements all of which vie to be the main definition to which the original conception will narrow.

The semantic opacity of the term “Zionism” is the product of its sociopragmatic failure and semantic drift. Semantic opacity is the inability of a term to be deduced simply by nature of the linguistic clues inherent to its form. Ostensibly, the term Zionism should be the distinct movement of a singular belief concerning Zion, just as capitalism is a specific movement concerning capital, autism is a specific condition concerning the self, and classism concerns a bias toward social strata. However, the semantic drift of Zionism (i.e. its progression toward an undetermined, socially-accepted, new, specified definition) and the sociopragmatic failure of Zionism (i.e. the inherent confusion in what Zionism means, as produced by diverse beliefs on what it *should* mean and do) have produced semantic opacity: the misunderstanding, miscommunication, confusion, and ambiguous meaning of a term.

How can protesters today wield signs that demand “Anti-Zionism ≠ Anti-Semitism” directly across the street from those who advocate that “Anti-Zionism is Anti-Semitism”? How can Zionism be, to Max Nordau, the “re-creation of a collective, communal Jewish identity”; meanwhile, the U.N. defined in 1975 (and has since repealed) that “Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination”?^{9,10} How can such variant, even diametric, conceptions of Zionism exist? Pragmatic failure, semantic drift, and semantic opacity. Essentially, Zionism has, linguistically, failed.

Terminology

It is now, amidst a discussion of linguistic clarity, that I should speak briefly on the terminology this paper will employ. In an effort to employ language that is as precise and apolitical as possible, I will use the language outlined below; of course, each term carries with it and in turn betrays intense biases. My belief is that a good deal of contemporary misunderstandings of Zionism come from the conflation of three different concepts referred to by the name Israel: There is the Land of Israel, or the land to which Jews lay claim based on their biblical relationship; for this, I will speak of ארץ ישראל. There is the People of Israel, or the children of the biblical character of Jacob (also known as ישראל, to complicate matters further); for the People, I will refer to עם ישראל. Finally, there is the modern State of Israel, established in 1948; here, I will write of מדינת ישראל.

Thesis

It is my belief that Zionism initially referred to an ideology; as such, as its meaning shifted toward movements, its meaning became varied based on who uttered it. As such, since the reconception of Zionism as a movement, Zionism’s meanings became multiple and heterogeneous and, therefore, lost all linguistic capacity: Zionist movements rendered the term meaningless.

⁹ Avineri, Making of Modern Zionism.

¹⁰ United Nations General Assembly Third Committee, resolution, Resolution 3379 (n.d.).

Proto-Zionism

Jewish nationalism was inherently irregular in that it formed outside of a territory.^{11, 12} The national consciousness of Jews was born in diaspora and is, therefore, highly abnormal. Rather than nationalism that is tied to the nation, land, government and/or context of a people's surroundings, Jewish nationalism has always been imaginative and forward looking: What might a Jewish nation look like? Born in post-Enlightenment modernity, Jewish nationalism existed especially among the Jewish intelligentsia; its ideological offspring, Zionism, was similarly born far earlier than we perhaps conceive of it.¹³

Functionally, Zionism and Jewish nationalism were popularized in response to antisemitism. After the 1880s pogroms in the Pale of Settlement, there was a fear that Jews would always be hated anywhere they were alien; the issue being that Jews were alien all throughout the diaspora.¹⁴ In his 1882 pamphlet, *Autoemancipation*, Leo Pinsker referred to this issue as "Jewish homelessness".¹⁵ The theoretical solution that early Zionism considered was emigration from hostility to a gathered Jewish population, particularly with an eye toward ארץ ישראל.¹⁶ Early Zionism, while not *caused* by antisemitism, was certainly ignited by it.¹⁷

At its core, Zionism has always been "developmental [in] nature of [its] ideology and its variability in time and space"; it has been an ever-evolving conception of a certain strand of Jewish nationalism.¹⁸ To that end, Zionism was not originally a movement, but an ideology: It was a theory that addressed the Jewish Question (i.e. antisemitism). I would argue that Zionism's development into a movement began with the creation of the Zionist Organization. Here, Jews considered Zionism less as a conceptual, theoretical ideology and more as a means to achieving a goal. As set out by the Zionist Organization, there were four concerns of Zionism, each of which further divided its supporters into disagreements.¹⁹

¹¹ Gideon Shimoni, *The Zionist Ideology* (Hanover, N.H, London: Brandeis University Press : published by University Press of New England, 2012).

¹² I should raise here two methodological issues with this paper. Firstly, most of my research came from reading Shimoni's *The Zionist Ideology*. This led to an internal debate: How can my paper serve any purpose if it is merely a recitation of Shimoni's work? My work is of limited value as a parroting of a more profound and cogent text. What is the purpose of creating for you a book report on a text you have already read, which I am certain to have misunderstood? My goal, therefore, is not to merely summarize Shimoni's work but to filter it through the lens of linguistics, asking "What do we mean by Zionism?". My second issue in writing this paper is one that could not be remedied so easily with a stick-to-it attitude and penitent for reframing the negative: I wrote this paper in exile. Shimoni's work, while impressive, dense, and extensive, is a rare commodity in Jerusalem bookstores. Unfortunately, the HUC Abramov Library only allows the book to be taken out for one day at a time; after begging the librarian to allow me to take it out for a weekend, I quickly read the text and jotted down notes, quotes, and page numbers. Essentially, the effect of this literary exile is that I am sure my speed caused me to misunderstand elements of Shimoni's text, and I could not re-consult his expertise while writing my paper. As such, I apologize in advance for any and all inaccuracies!

¹³ Shimoni, *Zionist Ideology*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Leon Pinsker, *Autoemancipation* (København: Dansk Zionistforening, 1882).

¹⁶ Shimoni, *Zionist Ideology*.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

1. The Definition of Jews as a Social Entity.²⁰
2. The Defective Situation of the Jews.²¹

Here, members of the Zionist Organization began to differ. The more traditional and orthodox among them defined this situation as גלות, or exile. The causes of exile were debated: Was it punishment by the Divine, trial of the Jewish people, or a symbol of cosmic disorder? Ahad Ha'am even disagreed with the general sentiment that the issue that Zionism should solve, indicating that the issue was with *Judaism, not Jews*.

3. Advocacy of a Potential Solution.²²

Zionists organizers varied on their belief of what solution would best serve the Jewish people, ranging in opinion from 1) some/all Jews gathering in ארץ ישראל for cultural and religious autonomy to 2) a sovereign Jewish state.

4. Means of Attaining Said Solution.²³

How might the Zionist Organization come about achieving its desired solution? Some advocated for a push for increased national identity among Jews around the world. Some, like Theodor Herzl, thought diplomacy was essential for the successful achievement of their potential solution. Others supported settling in ארץ ישראל. In *Rome and Jerusalem*, Moses Hess posited that settling in ארץ ישראל would serve well *to supplement*, rather than replace, the diaspora and increase national consciousness; exemplifying the “precursor phenomenon”, Hess wrote this belief decades before Zionism became a movement, meaning that there were no contemporaneous social movements to adopt his ideas.

Even from the establishment of the Zionist Organization, there was no consensus on the purpose or goal of Zionism. What began as an attempt to address the Jewish Question branched into variant approaches and theories. Essentially, the foundation of the Zionist Movement blurred the definition of Zionism.

Political Zionism

The diversity of beliefs even from the beginning of the Zionist Organization indicated that Zionism had very different meanings to different people (i.e. sociopragmatic linguistic failure). As a result, individual ideological camps formed according to confluences in belief and methodology; Political Zionism was one such camp.²⁴ Political Zionism was the name attributed to the belief of Herzl and his contemporaries that the establishment of a Jewish state would most effectively be achieved by “educating the Jews to a national consciousness, finding a suitable territory for a state, and negotiating with the Great Powers for the granting of an internationally

²⁰ Shimoni, *Zionist Ideology*.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

sanctioned political charter to settle it systematically and form a sovereign state for the Jews”.²⁵ At the core of Political Zionism was the belief that Zionism would achieve its goals only through diplomacy; however, not all Political Zionists agreed on the outcome they were working toward. While they agreed on the diplomatic approach to achieve a Jewish state, their conceptualizations of said state were varied.²⁶

The term Political Zionism was one of the first to qualify Zionism, filtering it through a particular lens. However, not all Political Zionists were created equal or identical; Herzl’s Political Zionism differed from his close friend Max Nordau’s.²⁷ To my mind, this raises a question: When do you add qualifiers and hyphens to a definition, and when do you create a new term? At what point does Herzlian Political Zionism become too wordy and distant from the ideals of Zionism, to the extent that a new term is needed?

Critics of Political Zionism, like Ha’am, held that the movement was too messianic and focused on antisemitism.²⁸ Instead of diplomacy, Ha’am, the father of Cultural Zionism, advocated that Zionism must focus on establishing a spiritual center in ארץ ישראל, believing that creativity would invoke culture, encourage education and, eventually, dissemination of the entire Zionist project; Menachem Ussishkin referred to this approach as Spiritual Zionism.²⁹

Synthetic/General Zionism

Another ideological camp formed after the Zionist Organization was first convened: General (or Synthetic) Zionism. Self-named for its attempt at synthesizing the many strands of Zionism into one pan-Zionism, it is unsurprising that supporters of General Zionism were largely concerned with collectivity of the Jewish people.³⁰ To them, the individual Jew was of little importance, compared to the broader, global Jewish people: עם ישראל.³¹ The other core tenets of General Zionism were self-help of עם ישראל and nationalism as a moral mission. To Ignacy Izaak Schwarzbart, it was integral that Jews held the interest of their nation as more important than that of any party: i.e. Zionism over everything.³² General Zionists largely conceived of their camp as a liberal movement; however, they would never call themselves as such in fear of association with the contentious Liberal (aka Reform) Jews.³³

The opposition of General Zionism held two major criticisms. To begin, they contested General Zionism’s self-conception as liberal.³⁴ Firstly, General Zionism held, either in fear of polarization or resilience against it, closely to the center of the spectrum of Zionist beliefs.³⁵ Perhaps expectedly, the pan-Zionist ideologues were essentially centrists. If liberalism is

²⁵ Shimoni, *Zionist Ideology*.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

concerned with the rights of the individual and General Zionism was concerned with collective identity, the two were incompatible.³⁶ The second criticism of the opposition was that it was a collection of “nots”, rather than a theory in and of itself: General Zionism was not diplomatic, like Political Zionism; not religious National-Religious Zionism; and not socialist like Labor Zionism.³⁷ Essentially, General Zionism existed *apart from*, rather than as its own entity.

To the continuing conversation of linguistics, what is the meaning of a faction born entirely out of opposition? If the meaning of a term only exists in contrast to another, does it have any intrinsic meaning? If a term’s very existence is reliant upon that of another, does it have any meaning? Is a Zionism forged in contrast still Zionism?

The other linguistic issue of General Zionism is exhibited by a subgroup they sprouted. Radical Zionists, also known as Democratic Zionists, also known as Al Ha-mishmar (led by Yitzhak Gruenbaum) arose out of disagreement with Chaim Weizmann’s politics as president of the Zionist Organization.³⁸ Though Radical Zionism agreed with Weizmann on the importance of labor as a social program and the need for עם ישראל to settle ארץ ישראל, they condemned his conciliatory nature concerning the British Mandate.³⁹ There are two linguistic issues here. Firstly, as above, there is a fractalization of Zionism into increasingly specific (and contradictory) camps, in which Zionism progresses to General Zionism to Radical General Zionism. Secondly, the several names for Radical Zionism demonstrate overlexicalization (i.e. when there exist too many signifiers/terms, all of which refer to the same symbol/concept).^{40, 41} Both linguistic issues contribute to confusion and pragmatic failure..

National-Religious Zionism

The central belief of National-Religious Zionism was that G-d’s covenant with עם ישראל was not a function of Jewish nationhood but was the source of it.⁴² To that end, ethnicity was a symbol of the covenant: a representation of what binds עם ישראל together.⁴³ Whereas National-Religious Zionists saw religion as the beliefs of the Jewish people, nationhood superseded belief and was characterized as the feeling (of belonging, connection, peoplehood, etc.) of Judaism.⁴⁴ Being an inherently religious movement, National-Religious Zionism faced a challenge: addressing secularity.⁴⁵ Though religion was, of course, integral to the National-Religious Zionist (they viewed secular nationalism as morally reprehensible, idolatrous, and born of hatred), they recognized that Orthodox Judaism was not the exclusive means of

³⁶ Shimoni, *Zionist Ideology*.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Paul Baker and Sibonile Ellece, *Key Terms in Discourse Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

⁴¹ Ironically, overlexicalization can also be referred to as overwording and lexical redundancy, and I find that deeply funny.

⁴² Shimoni, *Zionist Ideology*.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

being Jewish.⁴⁶ As such, in discussions of secular Judaism, National-Religious Zionists cited פיקוח נפש (the belief that saving a life should take precedence over the importance and observance of any other mitzvah).⁴⁷ In National-Religious Zionism, the net-positive of Jewish safety outweighed the impropriety of Secular Judaism, and, if the prevalence of and proximity to orthodoxy nudged secular Jews toward הלכה, all the better.⁴⁸

National-Religious Zionism recognized the toxicity of a conversation about messianism: There were some who believed that Jews gathering in ארץ ישראל represented an end to exile and the coming of the Messiah, others who believed it represented humans trying to hasten G-d's redemption of the Jewish people, and some believed that messianism was irrelevant and overly mystical for a conversation about Zionism.⁴⁹ As such, National-Religious Zionism avoided the topic altogether. As above, National-Religious Zionism soon became less a movement of homogenized, unanimous opinions and more of an umbrella for other subgroups. Among these was Hapoel Hamizrahi: the Orthodox Youth movement that wanted Zionism to revolve around political diplomacy, theology, and cultural education (and was staunchly opposed to messianism in Zionism).⁵⁰ Another subgroup was Religious Zionism (aka Orthodox Zionism). These individuals supported what they called דרך ארץ, or a nation created for the laws of Judaism.⁵¹ Believing that everything new was forbidden by Torah, they saw the foundation of a Jewish state as opportune to establish הלכה as the law of the land.

Opponents of National-Religious Zionism had varied criticism. A major issue raised by critics was that the National-Religious Zionist vision was unclear.⁵² For example, if a Jewish state was to be established as a Torah state, did this mean that הלכה was to be followed as law or moral guide, *or* did it call for the revival of the Sanhedrin.⁵³ Additionally, the movement seemed to have an ambivalent attitude toward socialism with varying levels of acceptance toward it and Secular-Labor Zionism.⁵⁴ Further, while the Neo-Orthodox were proponents of National-Religious Zionism's interaction with modernity, they were opposed to the movement's primary value being nationalism.⁵⁵ Winryb disagreed with the very principle of religious Zionism, arguing that Zionism was inherently secular. because it was the "establishment of a... Jewish home... by means of systematic human action without awaiting the action of supernatural and rationally inscrutable forces"; he advocated for Zionism being understood as "by the hand of man and not by the divine hand".⁵⁶

⁴⁶ Shimoni, *Zionist Ideology*.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Socialist Zionism

Socialist Zionism held that the only way to fix antisemitism was the global uprising of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie; however, unlike other strings of Socialism, they held Political Zionism (and Herzl) to be that bourgeoisie.⁵⁷ Unlike the other strings of Zionism, Socialist Zionism is perhaps best understood by the context of its members, many of whom have become integral to our conceptions of Zionist histories. Take, for instance, Nachman Syrkin who believed that, in order to benefit all Jews, Zionism must be Socialist; to him, messianic hopes could be turned into political action by virtue of the diaspora's involvement in local Socialism.⁵⁸ Perhaps the best known Socialist Zionist, David Ben-Gurion disagreed with Syrkin's essentialization of Socialism before all else; he posited that nationalism had to be the primary value, with Socialism--still essential--being a close second.⁵⁹ This became the guiding light of Mainstream Labor Zionism, an offshoot of Socialist Zionism.⁶⁰ To Ben-Gurion, the "crucial principle was working-class rule over all workers' economic enterprises"; he believed that Socialism was a necessary buttress for Zionism.⁶¹ In relating Socialism to Zionism, Ber Borochov actually agreed with his ideological opponent, Herzl.⁶² Borochov championed that antisemitism was not specific to Jews, but was a general fear of the other; as such, antisemitism would follow Jews anywhere they were alien/other, indicating that Jews needed their own territory.⁶³

The offshoots of Labor Zionism were myriad. Hapoel Hatzair emphasized young people moving to ארץ ישראל as pioneers in an effort to reverse exile, achieve self-realization, and promote their own well-being, all while being tied to the ארץ ישראל and labor.⁶⁴ Hapoel Hatzair supported the ideals of self-labor, national ownership of land, establishing a Jewish society with Jewish values, teaching Hebrew in ארץ ישראל and the diaspora, and increasing education toward labor and aliyah.⁶⁵ Leftist Socialist Zionism emphasized international, global Socialism above all else.⁶⁶ Perhaps the best known subsect of Socialist Zionism, Labor Zionism (and its supporters like Ben-Gurion) advocated for a Zionism that was colored by and filtered through socialism.⁶⁷

Some of the most vocal critics of Socialist Zionism were the Bund (the Jewish Socialist Labor Movement) and Marxists, who found Socialist Zionism to be fruitless at best and appalling at worst.⁶⁸ These voices held that Jewish nationalism was a moot point because the goal of Socialism was for all people to assimilate and dissolve into one culture. Further, they held that the movement was self-aggrandizing, bourgeois, utopian, and merely an opiate and

⁵⁷ Shimoni, *Zionist Ideology*.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ You're gonna be shocked... Ibid.

distraction from the more pressing goal of class consciousness.⁶⁹ Yehezkel Kauffman's criticism took an entirely different issue: He believed that class warfare and Socialism were simply irrelevant to Zionism because there was no established economy or bourgeois to overthrow in ארץ ישראל.

Revisionist Zionism

Dissatisfied with Weizmann and the Zionist Organization, Ze'ev Jabotinsky and the Revisionist Zionists created the New Zionist Organization, which would come to emphasize the military as the key to Zionism.⁷⁰ If General Zionism was the middle-of-the-way Zionism that was defined by nots, Revisionist Zionism was that which was not to be defined by anything else; to Jabotinsky, "monism" was key: One could have any perspective, belief system, or political affiliation; however, they were not to associate them with or attach them to Zionism.⁷¹ To that end, Jabotinsky was adamantly opposed to Labor (and Socialist) Zionism, which was predicated on Socialism being inextricable to Zionism.⁷² Revisionist Zionism held that, since עם ישראל's psyche was formed in ארץ ישראל, it was essential that they return.⁷³ Knowing that there was a majority Arab population in ארץ ישראל, the Revisionist Zionists took on an anti-compromise mindset that moved for "binational parity irrespective of the population size of Jews and the Arabs."⁷⁴ To Revisionist Zionism, no concessions were to be made with regard to land or politics: A Jewish majority was to be aimed for on both sides of the Jordan River.⁷⁵

A small but vocal subsection of Revisionist Zionism was Maximalist Revisionist Zionism (aka Radical Right Zionism), which was an anti-liberal, semi-messianic movement, formed in the wake of the 1929 Arab Riots.⁷⁶ This subgroup held fascist sympathies, wanted a "heroic cult of power", honored self-sacrifice, and believed in an "avant-garde revolutionary ethos of might".⁷⁷ The mindset of Maximalist Revisionist Zionism was reactionary, hostile, and prejudiced toward Arab populations in ארץ ישראל.⁷⁸

Cultural Zionism

Cultural Zionism concerned itself neither with religion nor politics; in fact, the Cultural Zionist found that the responsibility of Zionism was to promote secular Judaism, embracing those elements of Jewish religion and culture that were compatible with modernity.⁷⁹ This was not a rejection of religion, but a delineation--as Ha'am defined--between religious belief and

⁶⁹ Shimoni, *Zionist Ideology*.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

religious feeling.⁸⁰ The role of Judaism need not be, to the Cultural Zionist, a coda of laws nor a test of faith. Judaism was meant to promote the “autonomous realization of [עם ישראל] collective moral idea”: Judaism as cultural morality, not theology.⁸¹ To that end, Ha’am believed that the nationalist Jew need not be antithetical to the religious Jew.⁸² If nationalism was, as he viewed it, love of ארץ ישראל, Hebrew, Jewish history, and Jewish customs, then there was no reason that this must be incompatible with religiosity.⁸³

If Zionism is a surname and Cultural Zionism is its child, National-Cultural Zionism (aka Democratic Zionism) must be its grandchild. Still closely tied to the values of Cultural Zionism, National-Cultural Zionism merely added that the central goal of Zionism should be to revive Jewish peoplehood, particularly insofar as supporting “Normative Judaism”; this was staunchly opposed by Jewish intelligentsia and the rabbinic leadership who feared it would discourage and diminish religious observance among Jews.⁸⁴ The National-Cultural Zionist longed for a national cultural identity like that of any other nation, especially concerning themselves with the foundation of the “original Hebrew national culture in ארץ ישראל”.⁸⁵ To that end, they found education and universities as well as work and infrastructure to be essential to the Zionist project.

The main critics of Cultural Zionism were the Radical Secular Zionists who were against Ha’am’s vision of a national Judaism.⁸⁶ Radical Secular Zionists were, like General Zionists, another group that were largely defined by that which they did not support, opposing the vision of exile, rabbinic leadership, and the notion of chosenness of the Jewish people.⁸⁷ The core of the Radical Secular Zionist platform was “ethnic kinship rather than the beliefs and observances of religion”, which is remarkably similar to Ha’am’s perception of Judaism as inherited, rather than believed.⁸⁸

Conclusion

Into the above mix, I would like to add the definition of Zionism I have historically followed: Zionism is the non-exclusive right of the Jewish people to self-determination in ארץ ישראל. This definition, however, is dissonant with the above movements. Jabotinsky would disagree with my use of the word “non-exclusive”, believing Jews must not compromise in matters of a מדינת ישראל. The Maximalist Revisionist Zionists would likely take issue with my use of “self-determination” instead of sovereignty. Labor Zionists and Cultural Zionists would find fault in my lack of addressing the means of achieving such a vision (i.e. socialism and culture).

⁸⁰ Shimoni, *Zionist Ideology*.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

The Zionist movements largely concerned themselves with the means of establishing a *מדינת ישראל* or a culture in *ארץ ישראל* for *עם ישראל*; however, this has now been achieved. In essence, Israel (according to all three definitions) exists in Israel (again all three definitions work here). So what is left of the meaning of Zionism when so much of the contention in the varying definitions pertained to the means of achieving a Zionist goal?

What is Zionism? Above are twelve, seemingly incompatible groups, all of which call themselves Zionist. To Ben-Gurion, this was not an issue, but an asset; he believed that a difference in opinions was not only the means, but the goal of Zionism.⁸⁹ With so many definitions of Zionism, many of which are contradictory, I believe Zionism must be the areas in which each of these Zionist movements overlap. To my mind, there are only two things that are shared by the Zionist ideology and each of its subsequent movements: There is a problem among Jews and Judaism, and the solution lies somewhere in the relationship between *עם ישראל* and *ארץ ישראל*. Is that the definition of Zionism?

My belief is that the meaning of Zionism does not matter. There is not a universal meaning for the term and it, therefore, is meaningless to use. When the word Zionism is said, it conjures an entirely different image in the mind of each speaker and each receiver. To some, it evokes an image of Jewish safety and peoplehood. To others, it is a dogwhistle for support of racism and genocide. To some it connotes redemption; to others it conjures displacement. Essentially, Zionism has too many definitions and too much baggage to lead to productive conversation. As such, I believe it is time to stop defining and redefining the term, and to begin to employ more specific language. When speaking of Zionism, what is intended? When reaching for the word Zionism, is the conversation about Jewish self-determination, sovereignty, absolute rule, bipolarity, safety, security, flourishing, etc? Each of these means Zionism to different Zionists; if Zionism has no universal meaning, functional linguistics tells us it has no meaning at all. It is time to specify our language.

⁸⁹ Shimoni, *Zionist Ideology*.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Catherine, Bronwyn Bjorkman, Derek Denis, and Julianne Doner. "14.6 Semantic Change." Essay. In *Essentials of Linguistics*, 2nd ed. eCampusOntario, 2022.
- Avineri, Shlomo. *The Making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish state*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2017.
- Baker, Paul, and Sibonile Ellece. *Key Terms in Discourse Analysis*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- Dilshatovna Shakirova, Rezeda, Adelina Renatovna Safina, and Raisa Rustyamovna Akhunzianova. "Communicative Failures and Their Causes as a Result of Unsuccessful Communication." *International Journal of Engineering & Technology* 7, no. 4.38 (December 3, 2018): 469. <https://doi.org/10.14419/ijet.v7i4.38.24606>.
- Epstein, Nadine, and Amos Oz. At home with Amos Oz. Other. *Moment Magazine*, 2008.
- Pinsker, Leon. *Autoemancipation*. København: Dansk Zionistforening, 1882.
- Shimoni, Gideon. *The Zionist ideology*. Hanover, N.H, London: Brandeis University Press : published by University Press of New England, 2012.
- Thomas, Jenny. "Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure." *Applied Linguistics* 4, no. 2 (February 1, 1983): 91–112. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/4.2.91>.
- United Nations General Assembly Third Committee. Resolution. Resolution 3379 (n.d.).
- Valin, Robert D. van. "Functional Linguistics." *The Handbook of Linguistics*, March 11, 2017, 141–57. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119072256.ch8>.