NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Why Am I a Zionist? Part III

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 9, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Since its founding, Israel has been beset by war and violence, from the War of Independence in 1948 to the bombings of restaurants and buses in Tel Aviv. That violence has yielded certain lessons. The Yom Kippur War taught it that a small country, surrounded by hostile powers, can never again cede the great military asset of surprise to its enemies. The belated inaction of the West in response to the genocide in Bosnia taught the Israelis that while Western leaders would continue to mouth the words ?Never again!? they did not really mean it. (And, at every protest for action to end the genocide I attended in the 1990s, most of the Americans doing the protesting were Jews.) And, at Camp David, the Israelis learned that Yassir Arafat was simply incapable of making the kind of peace that could prove workable for either side.

It has been said of the Palestinians that they never lose an opportunity to lose an opportunity. That observation is true, but it is not fruitful. It is better to say that very few people have been as ill-served by their political leaders as the Palestinian people. Mired in corruption, perpetually misjudging the political landscape, tolerant of extremism, and not only in Hamas, but in the textbooks used to teach little Palestinian children a hatred of Jews, the leadership of the Palestinian people has misused its authority and failed to meet the most basic standards of governance, to say nothing of meeting the demands of the moments. It is worthwhile remembering that Israel was not the only nation to banish the PLO ? Jordan did also.

The most basic failing of the political leadership of the Palestinian people has been its failure to see that peace is possible. I was still a boy when Anwar Sadat made his historic visit to Israel in 1977 but I remember watching the images on television of his landing at the airport in Tel Aviv, of Sadat speaking before the Knesset ? which was a novel experience for him in two regards: Speaking in front of the Jewish parliament was a first, but it was also a first to speak in front of a freely elected parliament, something he would never permit in Egypt! Nonetheless, he made peace with Israel and it has stuck. King Hussein of Jordan made peace with Israel and it, too, has stuck. Syria did not officially make peace, but the truce in place since the 1967 war has stuck.

I do not defend every decision made by the various Israeli governments over the years. Permitting settlement of the West Bank was a tragic mistake, the consequences of which will continue to haunt the peace process. But, it seems to me an inescapable conclusion that in the on-going struggle between Israel and its neighbors, it is the Jewish State that continually, with some notable exceptions, behaves in ways that reflect the values we in the United States rightly hold dear. Yes, the Israeli Defense Forces sometimes bomb targets in Gaza which result in civilian casualties, but they go out of their way to avoid civilian casualties while the thugs who run Hamas intentionally put their arms depots in residential neighborhoods, even in hospitals. Hamas seeks to create civilian casualties to enrage the Arab street. The IDF tries to minimize civilian casualties. You pick.

Zionism has accomplished a great deal. Jews today have a sense of self-respect that was denied them for centuries. The Hebrew language has been resuscitated. Israel is a democracy, with free elections and the rights we take for granted here in the U.S. are found more often, and more surely, in Israel than in any of her neighbors, even for her Arab citizens. In two days, our nation will remember the terrorist attacks on September

11, 2001. We all remember where we were that horrible morning, what we were doing, who told us to turn on the TV. I remember something else. I remember that in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem that day, the people of Israel came out into the streets and wept. I remember, also, that in the West Bank the people came out into the streets and celebrated. You pick.

These are my many reasons drawn from history for being a Zionist but I have more personal ones as well. Ever since I can remember, I have been blessed to have wonderful Jewish friends. My Latin teacher in high school, who taught me much more than just Latin, was a Jew. The first person to encourage me to write for publication was a Jew. Many of my favorite dinner partners and debate partners are Jews. These blessings of friendship do not keep me from arguing with my Jewish friends on many issues, but they have led me to consider my responsibility as a Christian to the Jewish people.

My father?s family is from Poland. A few years back, I brought my Dad to Poland to see where his parents had been born and raised, and to meet our cousins. Most of the family lives in the small town of Nur, not far from Treblinka. The older cousins remember the smell of the burning bodies from the camp. I would like to think that if I had been in Poland during the Shoah, I would have resisted, I would have hid Jews, I certainly would not have worked at the camps. But, who am I kidding. I have not detected much in the way of heroism in my self, although I have never had to confront such a moral enormity as those Polish Catholics did. Culture exerts a powerful force upon the conscience. Would I have had the courage to resist?

This question should haunt all Christians, and not only because of the centuries of abuse, persecution and murder that Christians have meted out to Jews. It should haunt us because anti-Semitism is still alive. It is alive in Poland, even though there are few Jews left to hate. It is alive in the United States, although strangely it has shifted from the extreme right to the extreme left in recent years. Here, I detect another singular personal obligation to defend Jews and Zionism: Many of the people with whom I agree on a host of other issues, seem far too willing to believe the worst about Israel and the best about the Palestinians. I first noticed this in 2004, when working on a congressional campaign in Connecticut. We would go to these small town meetings and at every third or fourth one, a member of the local town committee would get all worked up into this harangue against Israel that quickly shifted into a diatribe against ?the Jews.? The prominence of many Jewish Americans in the ranks of neo-conservatism led some on the left to make nefarious charges of ?dual loyalty,? charges with which any Catholic is familiar. In any event, these harangues were possessed of a passion that scared me, quite different from other harangues about tax policy or the then-topical case New London v. Kelso, which provoked strong emotions, but nothing like these anti-Israel rants, which were unhinged, vicious and with ample, frightening historical precedent.

Anti-Semitism does not overtake a culture all it once. It happens bit by bit, when our guard is down. Certainly, one can oppose any given decision by the Israeli government without being an anti-Semite: You have only to read the Israeli press to recognize that. But, given the burden of our Christian history of maltreating Jews, I think we should accept the burden of making sure, one hundred percent sure, that we are not giving any oxygen to the anti-Semitic flame that seems such a perennial in Christian history. When it flares up, stamp it out. If you notice a breeze that is fanning the flames, shut the window against the breeze.

So, my final reason for being a Zionist? Because I am a Christian, conscious of the history of anti-Jewish hatred that has for so long characterized the life of the Christian community, so conscious of the failings of my own ethnic people, the Poles, but also aware of the shortsightedness of this nation, America, I call home, and deeply worried that anti-Semitism continues to find ways to survive in Western culture. For these reasons, as well as my understanding of the historical record as set forth last week, I believe I have a moral obligation to support the proposition that the Jews are entitled to a state, that that state is Israel and that, whatever her faults, and reserving the right to criticize those faults, nonetheless I will support that state and its right to exist. That is what it means to be a Zionist. I am proud to be one.

Source URL (retrieved on *08/30/2014 - 01:33*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/why-am-i-zionist-part-iii