

Words Have Meaning

by Aviva Miriam Patt

Words have meaning. Racism. Colonialism. Zionism. Anti-Semitism. Each of these words has been in common usage for a century or more, with universally recognized definitions.

“Racism” is the most recent term, first entering the lexicon in 1902 to describe the belief that race is a fundamental determinant of human traits and capacities and that each of the races is superior or inferior based on presumed inherent differences. “Colonialism” is the most ancient, derived from the Latin *colonia* (settled land). It appeared as “colony” in the 14th century in historical descriptions of Roman settlements outside Italy, and as “colonialism” in 1864 to describe the movement of people from their native land to a new one while remaining subject to the mother country.

In 1890, writer and publisher Nathan Birnbaum coined the term “Zionism” to describe the movement for the return of the Jewish people to their homeland. He expounded on the concept in 1893 with the publication of a pamphlet calling for a “National Rebirth of the Jewish People in its Homeland.” The ideas articulated in the pamphlet became known as “Political Zionism” and later as “Practical Zionism,” which laid out steps to achieve the movement’s goals through immigration, agricultural settlements, and the establishment of educational institutions.

“Anti-Semitism” was first used by German nationalist Wilhelm Marr, author of *The Way to Victory of Germanism over Judaism* and founder in 1879 of the *Antisemiten-Liga* (League of Anti-Semites). The *Antisemiten-Liga* rejected the idea that Jews could be assimilated, calling for their expulsion from the country. Although the term “anti-Semitism” could be interpreted as applying to descendants from any of the Semitic-language tribes in the Near East, since its coinage in the 19th century it has been understood to mean hostility toward or discrimination against Jews as a religious, ethnic, or racial group.

These long-established words have been subject to misuse in the current political debate about Israel. The notorious “Zionism is Racism” resolution of the United Nations in 1975 was not the first attempt to falsely equate the movement for a Jewish homeland with ideas of racial superiority. In 1973 the UN General Assembly condemned the “unholy alliance between South African racism and Zionism.” The July 1975 Mexico City Declaration of the Equality of Women included the elimination of Zionism with racism and colonialism as necessary for international cooperation and peace. The following month, the Organization of African Unity condemned “the racist regime in occupied Palestine” as part of the same imperialist campaign of racist policies in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Later that month the Conference of Ministers of Non-Aligned Countries condemned Zionism as a threat to world peace. The previous resolutions were all cited in the November 1975 resolution of the United Nations which “Determines that Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination.”

None of these resolutions explain **how** Zionism, the national movement for a Jewish homeland, is racist. Race, however one defines it, has no bearing on whether someone is or can become Jewish. Jews come in every color and all are equal under religious law and community standards. There is nothing in Zionist theory about the superiority or inferiority of any race or the superiority of Jews over any other ethnic group. Jewish identification as a people, seeking self-determination in the land of their origin, is no more racist than any other ethnic group’s national aspirations.

The equally fallacious conflation of Zionism and imperialism is also unexplained. The Zionist movement was not a colonial enterprise—the transfer of people by one nation to exert its sovereignty over another. It was the emigration of people from various nations to escape government discrimination, oppression, and violence. Jewish settlers in Palestine were not agents of any imperial power, holding the land and extracting the resources for the benefit of the mother country. They were refugees seeking a life of freedom in another land. They did not come by force in defiance of local authority, but with the approval of the government, which from the birth of the Zionist movement until 1917 was the Ottoman Empire. Under the British Mandate, Jews came both with the permission of the government and without it, but never as representatives of the British Empire to maintain its dominion over Palestine.

So how did Zionism come to be equated with racism and colonialism despite the lack of any connection by definition? The answer is politics, specifically Israeli policy toward Palestinians in the land occupied by Israel since 1967. Israeli law guarantees equal rights to both Jewish and non-Jewish citizens and it is this equality under the law that refutes the claim that Israel is an apartheid state. But Israeli law does not extend to Palestinians in the occupied territory, and even Palestinians living in East Jerusalem, which has been formally annexed by Israel, do not hold Israeli citizenship. A people living for over 50 years under military occupation and military law, without the right to vote for the government that rules them, is contradictory to democracy.

Physical separation of the occupied territory with barriers and checkpoints, and the requirement for the occupied to get permits to leave their areas looks very much like apartheid, as does the establishment of alleged self-rule, which can be overturned at will by the Israeli government. Critics of Israeli policy toward the Palestinians in the occupied territories have adopted terms they are familiar with to condemn the similarities of Israeli policies to the practice of Europeans' occupation of African and Asian lands. But words have meaning. Condemning Zionism, which is a political philosophy wholly disconnected from racism and colonialism, is not the same as condemning policies of the Israeli government. Like any government, the Israeli government may be racist or colonialist.

Words have meaning but definitions are not static. In recent decades, "racism" has come into common usage as a term to describe not just an ideology of racial superiority, but actions that deny or impair civil rights of a racial group. "Racial" has also found an expanded meaning, applying to national origin or language groups, as a substitute or synonym for "ethnic." Not all ethnic groups are covered by this new definition, however, and its application to Jews varies, usually coincident with discussion of Israel.

A new definition of "anti-Semitism" has also been offered, although it has not gained wide acceptance as it is embroiled with the politics of Israel and Palestine. Developed in 2016 by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance as a "working definition" for education and academic research purposes, it was adopted by the US State Department (DOS) in 2019 as a tool to recognize both discrimination and hate crimes, adding several illustrations of anti-Semitism to the DOS working definition of 2010. Some examples, such as violence against Jews or collective responsibility for individual actions, are universally accepted as manifestations of anti-Semitism. But those that relate to Israel and Israeli policy are more controversial and there are some contradictions. Although the definition includes the caveat that "criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic," many critics of Israel have been branded as anti-Semites for complaints similar to those made against other countries. Claiming that "the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor" is deemed a violation, yet being a racist endeavor is a charge that many of Israel's critics also make against the United States. "Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis" is also a violation, yet other nations, including the United States and some European countries, also have been accused of enacting Nazi-like policies.

When we call those with whom we have political disagreements "anti-Semites" despite their having no animus toward Jewish people, or "racists" despite their not being purveyors of racial superiority ideology, we are engaging in ad hominem attacks to discredit them rather than debating the merits of their ideas. Worse, we are defining who they are in a way that denigrates their humanity. Words have meaning.

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