

Varieties of Zionism

By [David Heim](#)

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In a booklet titled *Zionism Unsettled*, a group of Presbyterians has issued [a blanket denunciation of Zionism](#), terming the Jewish quest for a homeland in the ancient land of Israel inherently racist, exclusionary, and devastating for non-Jewish inhabitants.

Jewish and [Christian groups](#) have rightly criticized the booklet for its sledgehammer one-sided approach, theologically and politically. It presumes to define Zionism without a serious engagement with mainstream Jewish leaders and scholars. Its theological section, for example, displays no interest in the sophisticated discussion of Jewish “exceptionalism” as developed by scholars like [Michael Wyschogrod](#).

Some useful reading for the Presbyterians who produced *Zionism Unsettled* would be Ari Shavit’s engaging, personalized history of Israel, *My Promised Land*. (Here is [an interview with Shavit](#).)

For one thing, Shavit lays out the sheer variety of Zionisms—secular and religious, socialist and capitalist, ascetic and hedonistic, utopian and pragmatic. The creativity and energy of this broad venture is what enabled Jews to gain a foothold in the land and establish the infrastructure of a modern state—which remains enormously vibrant.

Shavit also makes clear the sense of desperation that fueled the movement from the start. For Jews who experienced the pogroms of Europe—and who had inklings of the Holocaust to come—creating a homeland represented the last chance for Jews.

“Zionism was an orphans’ movement,” Shavit writes:

As the unwanted sons and daughters of the Christian Continent fled the hatred of their surrogate mother, they discovered that they were alone in the world. . . . That is why they came to Palestine and why they now cling to the land with such desperate determination.

Shavit is by no means blind to the dark side of Zionism—its often violent removal of native Palestinians from the land. Indeed, he is haunted throughout the book by this history. He devotes a chapter to tracing and mourning the expulsion of Palestinians from the town of Lydda during the 1948 war.

Shavit wishes that Zionism could have succeeded in another way—but he doesn't pretend to know how that could have happened. And in the end, he is glad that it did succeed.

Shavit's promised land is far from innocent, and his history contains no untainted heroes. But unlike *Zionism Unsettled*, it has no simple villains either.