

“Ideological” is one adjective that surely applied to the Zionist environment of my childhood; like others societies founded on the mass-political ideologies of the end of the 19th century, mine pitted the personal well-being of the individual against loyalty to the group, branding those who sought the former decadent egoists, idolizing those who died for a collective cause. The world of my youth was founded on *group metaphysics*:. Like their socialist, nationalist or Christian-democratic contemporaries, the Zionists who surrounded me believed you entered the world as a member of a group and the rest of your life was determined by that fact. In the long run, we were warned, you cannot escape the destiny of your people; Jews who understood it early, immigrated to Palestine and saved their skins; self-deniers who tried to sever their Jewish connection were reminded of the iron clad law that tied each to its set when, in spite of all their protests and disclaimers, they found themselves in concentration camps. Adversity in that universe of sets can be eternally bloody; certain sets are mortal enemies of others and their set-antagonism is bequeathed to each and every member. Membership was not an option, possible for individuals to overrule; often enough, your relation is established by others. Zionism began after Karl “the beautiful” Lueger, who founded the Austrian Christian-Socialist movement, proclaimed to great cheers that it was up to *him - a real Austrian* - to decide who was a Jew and who was not.

For Zionists, as well as socialists, nationalists and other fin de siècle ideologues, the affirmation of group-identity was not only a necessity but a harbinger of a more perfect metaphysical condition: Group-affirmation was an ‘ontological completion’ of sorts and purveyor of a higher plane of self-consciousness. Persons who accepted their group-identity as an ‘elected essence’ became aware of the deeper causes of their lives that gave their individual trajectories their peculiar shapes; identifying with their group - considering its well-being as their own - afforded a direct contact with the field of historical forces in virtue of which they ascended to a higher metaphysical realm. Like athletes who internalized the laws governing the motions of their bodies, instinctively adjusting their movements constantly for optimal results, that new breed of activists felt the pull of history, as it were, believing they gained the ability to respond confidently to events that would have surely befuddled their bourgeois fathers. Indeed, if one thing united the anarchists, socialists, nationalists and Zionists who sprouted in the Edwardian epoch, was *contempt* of self-centered bourgeois life. Individual existence was *boring*; putting your lot with a group and its struggles promised an adventurous and exciting existence, if nothing else.

Fully committed to their newly found group-identity, young rebels of all stripes left their comfortable homes and turned their backs on the excellent prospects awaiting educated individuals of their ilk. The nationalists among them enlisted in various armies to fight for national glory; anarchists formed cells, planning nefarious acts of terror to ‘give voice to the suffering masses’; the sensitive and socially minded left the city for the heartland to help improve the lives of the peasants and learn from these simple honest beings about the soul of their nation; the Zionists, for their part, travelled to the wilderness to settle on their historical land and realize their group-dream. Later waves of immigrants arriving, like my parents, after the second world war were scolded by those awaiting them “We warned you but you did not listen! No one can escape the destiny of his group!”

*The society of my childhood accepted the metaphysics of groups unquestionably; People defined themselves as residents of that higher universe, who willingly sacrificed their well-being as individuals for the sake of their group. “I would have had a much bigger career in Europe or the United States, they said to anyone who listened, ending with the refrain: “Being a proud Jew - though not an observant one! - I chose Israel, instead.” The rejection of the world of the diaspora was not only a moral critique but something lying deeper in the soul. Anti-Semites filled them with visceral horror and their kin in Brooklyn or Golders Green, who tolerated them, with revulsion of champion dogs towards the runts in the litter. The contempt was left largely unspoken; each and every Jew, we were told in school, was a potential Israeli citizen and thus someone to treat courteously, if not with genuine respect. In times of trouble, though, the Zionist does not hesitate to use physical violent force. Herzl bequeathed his sense of group-honor to his followers as well as the imperative to defend it at all costs; many an Israeli felt compelled, as the prophet of Zionism would, to sort things out in the parking lot of a foreign bar after a slur or a slight.*

