

“Not in our name”

Zionism is not the same as Judaism

by Detlef Koch*



Detlef Koch. (Picture ma)

Today, 13 June, marks the start of an event in Vienna that was long considered unthinkable: Jews from all over the world are gathering – rabbis, Holocaust survivors, intellectuals, Mizrahi activists, left-wing voices

from the diaspora – to publicly, confidently and in an organised manner criticise Zionism. Not out of hatred, but out of responsibility. Not as a taboo-breaking act, but as a return to the ethos of Jewish history. The “First Jewish Anti-Zionist Congress” is not a marginal phenomenon. It is the moral symptom of a radical change – and an invitation to finally rethink the concepts that have paralysed political criticism for decades.

A birthplace becomes a border

It is no coincidence that this congress is taking place here. Vienna was the starting point of the Zionist movement, *Theodor Herzl's* spiritual home, where the idea of a Jewish state first gained political ground. But Vienna was also the place where Herzl failed: in 1897, he wanted to hold the first Zionist Congress here – but the Jewish community refused. The idea seemed too dangerous, too radical, too divisive.

Today, more than a century later, the debate is back. Not as a historical footnote, but as an analysis of the present. For what was once conceived as Jewish “normalisation” – the establishment of a state of their own – has, according to voices in Vienna, turned into an internationalist project that justifies violence, exclusion and apartheid. Zionism, they say, has strayed from Jewish ethics. What is more, it has usurped the



Press conference: Jewish anti-Zionist declaration/presentation and background information. (Picture screenshot) moral heritage of Judaism – “in our name,” but without our consent.

A pluralistic reclaiming

The congress therefore sees itself not as an attack, but as a reclaiming. As an attempt to make the diversity of Jewish voices heard again. In a world where Israel is declared the sole voice of “the Jews,” this is an act of political hygiene.

“We want to make it clear that Zionism is not the same as Judaism. That it is possible to criticise Israel – from a deeply Jewish perspective,” says *Dalia Sarig*, co-organisator and spokesperson for the *Vienna Anti-Zionist Initiative*. She speaks quietly but firmly. The accusation of anti-Semitism has become a weapon – against Jews who refuse to be complicit in oppression.

And so, they sit in Vienna, *Stephen Kapos*, a Holocaust survivor from Hungary who now fights for the rights of the Palestinians. *Ilan Pappé*, a historian from Haifa who describes the Nakba not as a myth but as documented ethnic cleansing. *Yakov Rabkin*, an Orthodox intellectual from Canada who sees the ideological project of Zionism as a theological aberration. *Reuven Abergel*, a Mizrahi activist who recalls the deprivation of rights of Oriental Jews in Israel. And *Iris Hefets*, a native Israeli and psychoanalyst in Berlin, whose criticism of Israel’s wars has earned her accusations of “Jewish self-hatred.”

What unites them is not an ideology, but a moral reflex. The conviction that Jewish history does not serve to legitimise new injustices. And that the “never again” that European politicians so readily invoke must not be selective.

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“Never again” for everyone

This is precisely where the political explosive power of the congress lies. For it demands what Europe’s political class has been avoiding for years: a universal application of the lessons of the Holocaust. Not as a relativisation, but as an obligation. Those who invoke the Shoah, the argument goes, cannot remain silent when another people is systematically disenfranchised, bombed and blockaded today. “I am a Holocaust survivor,” says Stephen Kapos in his opening statement. “I know what it means when a human being is dehumanised. What is happening in Gaza violates everything our history should stand for.”

It is a sentence that shifts the boundaries. Not because it is provocative, but because it refuses to treat history as property. The Shoah, according to the tenor of the conference, is not diplomatic capital, but a moral promise. And this promise does not end at ethnic borders.

This is also the central slogan of the conference: “*Never again – for everyone*”. A sentence that sounds so simple that one almost overlooks its radical nature. For it calls into question the European “memory arrangement” that makes Israel an enclave of moral untouchability. But the Vienna Congress says: precisely because we are Jews, we must not remain silent. Precisely because we were persecuted, we are obliged to defend others.

Anti-Zionism ≠ anti-Semitism

The accusation levelled by opponents of the event is well known: anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism in disguise. The fact that this accusation is levelled against Holocaust survivors, rabbis and Israeli dissidents reveals how hollow it has become.

Anti-Zionism is not hatred of Jews – it is criticism of a political ideology that turns religion into a state, morality into military doctrine, and history into a claim to ownership. And those who are not allowed to criticise all this lose what has always distinguished Judaism: its prophetic voice. “Anti-Zionism is not a contradiction of Judaism,” explains Yakov Rabkin. “It is a return to its ethical foundations.”

The congress emphasises this very clearly. It distances itself from any anti-Semitism, any trivialisation of the Shoah, any glorification of violence. But it does not allow criticism of a nationalism – and that is what Zionism is – to be branded as anti-Semitic per se.

The debate, it seems, has reached a point where it is no longer about words, but about dignity.

Silence and resonance

The reactions to the congress are predictable – and yet telling. The *Israelitische Kultusgemeinde Wien* (Vienna Jewish Community) remains silent, at least officially. Behind closed doors, there is talk of “self-hatred,” “betrayal” and “shame.” Conservative National Council President *Wolfgang Sobotka* called Dalia Sarig an “anti-Semitic Jew” last year – an accusation that, when turned on its head, is almost impossible to surpass in absurdity.

The major Austrian press remains conspicuously reticent. No editorials, no debate. The feuilleton pages are ducking away. Instead, international platforms, Palestinian media and left-wing Jewish networks are reporting on the matter – a media atlas that shows how little space there has been for Jewish plurality in the German-speaking discourse to date.

At the same time, however, there are expressions of solidarity from all over the world. From Jewish groups in London, Montreal and Johannesburg. From Holocaust survivors in France. From progressive American rabbis. A new Jewish diaspora seems to be forming – not to set itself apart, but to finally be able to speak again.

Epilogue: Standing tall amid the dissonance

There are no simple statements in this debate. But there are necessary ones. And one of them is:

“Not in our name.”

Not in our name shall occupation be declared protection. Not in our name shall apartheid become state policy. Not in our name shall the memory of the Holocaust be used to silence others.

The first *Jewish Anti-Zionist Congress* in Vienna is not a marginal phenomenon. It is a prelude. Perhaps not to political upheaval – but to the revival of that Jewish voice that refuses to be co-opted by power. A voice that draws on history – but is not entrenched in it. A voice that remembers, not to rule, but to bear witness. And perhaps therein lies its greatest significance: not that it delegitimises Israel, but that it brings Judaism back to itself.

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