In 1905, the Zionist Congress, the supreme decision-making body of the Zionist movement established by Theodor Herzl, officially determined that the Land of Israel was its hill to die on. Though that resolution is oft-forgotten, its reverberations can be felt to this day, its spirit infusing even a large number of Israelis identified with the center-left of the political spectrum. And that deep-seated passion for the Land, while historically comprehensible in the context of a zealous, upstart Zionist movement, today serves as a thorny obstacle to ending the military occupation.

To set the stage, here’s a cursory, Cliff Notes version of that bygone chapter: In April 1903, Joseph Chamberlain, head of the British government’s Colonial Office offered Herzl and the Zionist Organization a territory in British-controlled East Africa for Jewish autonomy and mass settlement. (The proposal erroneously became known as the “Uganda Plan,” though the area, about two-thirds the size of Green Line Israel, was actually located in present-day Kenya.) Though initially unsympathetic to a destination outside Palestine, Herzl warmed to it as a stopgap measure following that same month’s devastating Kishinev Pogrom, and at the August 1903 Sixth Zionist Congress, Herzl’s ally, Max Nordau, compared East Africa to a temporary emergency “night-shelter” (nachtasyl).

The plan, however, provoked visceral opposition. It prompted a mass walkout led by the Russian delegation, and pushed the young movement to the brink of schism. Herzl understood the connection to the Land of Israel, of course, but he hadn’t fathomed the depths to which this attachment plunged: “These people have a rope around their necks, but they still refuse,” he said of the Uganda Plan’s opponents, who rejected the argument that Zionism’s prime aim should be to alleviate Jewish suffering in the here and now.

While the Sixth Congress eventually okayed Herzl’s compromise to create an investigative committee to examine the British proposal in greater depth, it did so with only plurality support (the noes and abstentions combined held the majority). Two years later, the 1905 Seventh Zionist Congress, the first held following Herzl’s death in 1904, unanimously voted down “Uganda” and made any similar options a dead letter.

So, what does all this “ancient history” have to do with today’s events, one might reasonably ask. The answer is that the fervent devotion to the Biblical homeland that succeeded in defeating the “Uganda Plan” and Jewish
Territorialism generally over one hundred years ago became incorporated into the zeitgeist of the Yishuv and of the Jewish-Israeli community, and now functions as a warm and fuzzy filter through which the Occupation is viewed—when it’s not being ignored altogether. And, as two very recent examples demonstrate, this is true not only for rightwing annexationists, but also for supposed members of the Israeli peace camp.

Take new President of Israel, Yitzhak Herzog, for example. Herzog, who took office in July, decided to usher in Israel’s new school year on September 1 by paying an official visit to schools in two West Bank settlements, Har Bracha and Sal’it. The visit from Israel’s “Number One Citizen” amounted to a clear “boost of support” to the settlement enterprise, the Jerusalem Post correctly put it.

So why did this former Labor Party chair, this ostensible supporter of a two-state solution which the settlements were designed to preclude, believe it best to “put aside… the political debates regarding a final-status arrangement with our Palestinian neighbors” and celebrate these contraventions of international law? Because of that same overwhelming sentiment toward the Land of Israel displayed by the early Zionist movement. Here’s Herzog in his own words:

“The Har Bracha settlement is in my DNA as an Israeli and as a Jew… I want to … speak of a simple truth— the Jewish people’s deep connection [to] this space, which cannot be denied or diminished… Every visit to Samaria is a dive into the depths of our history. Past and present are folded together here between the mountains.”

Herzog’s “deep connection” apparently blinded him to the additional fact that the Har Bracha settlement and its outposts have been tied to the extremists involved in the anti-Palestinian settler violence operation known as “Price Tag.” And his “Jewish DNA” must have caused him to overlook the fact that, in posing with Har Bracha’s rabbi, Eliezer Melamed, he legitimized a figure who has called on soldiers to disobey orders to dismantle illegal West Bank outposts.

Israel’s Shalom Achshav (Peace Now) rightly disparaged Herzog’s decision to embrace and normalize the extremists, as did columnist Gideon Levy in Haaretz. But Levy also astutely observed that Herzog’s behavior could be traced to his sense that he was not actually “traveling abroad,” even though he was outside the country’s sovereign borders, but, instead, was visiting “in the heart of Israel.” Skewed by that mindset, the President heaped praise on the area’s Jewish settlers while remaining strikingly oblivious to the Palestinian majority there, a majority that lives under Israeli control, but is denied security and civil and human rights.

Herzog, unfortunately, is not an aberration within Israel’s center-left. Earlier this summer, MK Yair Golan of Meretz fell victim to a similar sentimentalization of Eretz Yisrael. Interviewed on Israeli television, Golan
took issue with the peace camp’s use of the word “occupation” to describe the Israeli regime in the territories—a term that appears repeatedly in his own party’s platform.

“This word,” occupation, he argued, “has a connotation of a harsh, callous act, as if we took an area of land that we have nothing to do with.” Golan, then, would have us regard Israel’s military control as something less than harsh because, “ultimately, our place of origin is the areas of Judea and Samaria and Jerusalem... the land of the Bible, where, after all, most of the stories don’t take place in the coastal plain, the Galilee or the Negev.”

Golan also seems to be concerned that his support for a two-state solution is perceived by the general public as disloyalty to the ancient homeland. So, he continues apologetically: “I say to my friends on the right—my tie to every clump of earth in the Land of Israel is not less than yours. Clearly, I have a profound emotional and spiritual connection to Shilo, Bet El, and Hebron [in the West Bank], and it’s no coincidence that I hold the Book of Books close to me everywhere.”

Golan remains something of a fish out of water in Meretz, a party he defaulted into after initially entering Knesset via Ehud Barak’s now-disbanded political grouping. And, based on the reaction to Golan’s remarks served up by the chair of Meretz’s executive, Uri Zaki, it would be surprising to find Golan on the party slate come the next elections.

“What [Yair] Golan doesn’t get,” Zaki reacted via Twitter, “is that ‘occupation’ doesn’t relate to how we apprehend the Land, but to a situation in which three million Palestinians have been living for 54 years. Living under military control, without basic rights and without citizenship, and alongside them more and more citizens of Israel in the same area with full democratic rights. It’s very sad that such statements are coming from a Knesset member who was included in the Meretz slate.”

“Love looks not with the eyes,” Shakespeare wrote in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, “and therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.” When it comes to Israel and Palestine, love of the patria apparently can have a similar dazzling effect, causing even well-meaning figures to misperceive or euphemize or downplay the reality before them.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with holding a warm, thoughtful attachment to the history of one’s people and to the land it has inhabited. The trouble begins when attachment to the past clouds our judgement of the present. So, no matter where Abraham sojourned, or Jacob wrestled with God’s angel, or the Jewish tabernacle was temporarily housed, Knesset Member Golan must recognize that “occupation” is indeed the appropriate term for rule via military force. And President Herzog, who now represents all of Israel, must acknowledge that, like Jews, Palestinians have their own DNA and their own “connection to this place.” If they are to be part of an eventual solution, they must temper their
ahavat haaretz, their love of the Land of Israel, and be driven first and foremost by r’difat tzedek v’shalom, a pursuit of justice and peace.

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