

The role of zionism in bezmozgis' the betrayers



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Baruch Kotler is a cabinet member in the Knesset and a Soviet-born Zionist hero. When Israel's prime-minister announces to take down the West Bank settlements and Kotler refuses, Kotler's political opponent threatens to send photos of his affair with a young mistress, Leora, to Israeli publications. Kotler refuses to give in to the opposition, so he and Leora flee to the Crimean resort town of Yalta. After their hotel reservation disappears, the pair decides to rent a room from a woman advertising her bed and breakfast. At this woman's home, in a strange twist of fate, Kotler confronts the man whose false accusation sent him to a Gulag for 13 years.

In *The Betrayers*, Zionism plays a major role in the decisions the characters make as well as become the arena for which all the betrayals play out. For many characters in this novel, betrayal has come to be understood as anything that works against the Zionist movement. Zionism is the Jewish movement that supports the re-establishment of a Jewish homeland in the territory deemed as the historic Land of Israel. Prior to the Holocaust, Zionism was mostly understood as a reactionary utopia in response to the anti-Semitism that plagued Eastern Europe, but afterwards it gained immense traction as there began a mass immigration of European Jews to Israel.

For Kotler, Zionism has been the main drive and sole motivation in his life. This is best demonstrated in Kotler through his disillusionment with Israeli politics and his mention of Crimea as formerly a potential homeland for the

Jews, as he is so committed to the cause that he can withstand blackmail and accusations of betrayal, while still self-identifying as a Zionist hero.

Kotler is only able to digest his own moral choices based on this reckoning of what is and is not a betrayal of this fundamental dedication to the movement. Kotler told Leora, “—Imagine, ... this could have been the Jewish homeland. Then the Tatars and the Russians could have demanded we go back to where we belong, as the Palestinians do now.” (Bezmozgis 197). Here he is referencing to Crimea before World War II when Tatars and Jews lived there together, along with many other ethnic groups. Even though Kotler says that Tatars and Russians would be like the Palestinians if Crimea would have become the Zionist homeland; however, in the current political situation Russian nationalism is a lot more similar to Zionism. Thus, for Kotler, has made an anecdote that reflects his individual friend-enemy distinction, and even minority groups such as the Crimean Tatars, have become enemies or betrayers in his alternate history scenario.

When Enemies Reunite. On the other hand, it was Kotler’s and Tankilevich’s shared dedication to Zionism that finally brought the two sworn rivals to an understanding. When they parted ways, Tankilevich still hoped to immigrate to Israel one day with Kotler’s help. And Kotler was glad to be coming back to what he now considers his home. For many Soviet refuseniks, even betrayers like Tankilevich, Israel as both a physical place and a Jewish utopian idea continues to be an object of hope for both the betrayer and the betrayed. Thus, their shared dedication to Zionism allowed Kotler to see Tankilevich’s humanity and help him as a Zionist ally would.

The West Bank Settlements Withdrawal. Kotler and his son, Benzion, have a shared dedication to Zionism; however, Benzion is faced with a difficult ideological challenge when he receives orders to oversee the withdrawal from the West Bank settlements as an Israeli Defense Force soldier. Benzion sees the withdrawal as the state's betrayal of the settlers' dedication and efforts. His only option was to then go AWOL, as many refuseniks have done, although Benzion was not doing it out of concern for the Palestinians. Benzion calls his father as he is weighing his options, and despite Kotler's stance against withdrawing from the occupied area, he assures his son that he must follow orders.

In this instance, Kotler took the side of the military; which meant that the definition of betrayal here depended on a disharmony within the purview of a greater shared dedication to Zionism. A unified Zionist stance was much more effective over the long run, while the settlers who represented a more extreme version of the nationalist movement were betraying the cause ultimately.

Kotler accounts the differing opinions he and his family on the settlers to the decade that he and his wife spent apart when he was in the Gulag:

The state of Israel rebuffed her. Because I'd involved myself in the larger human rights movement, I wasn't Zionist enough for them. ... So who embraced her and who helped her? The religious. The settlers. (Bezmozgis 156)

In his mind, his relationship with Zionism is more about the unshaken faith and commitment he puts into the cause and how that translates into

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something larger than himself as an individual. The criticism he has received from other Zionist saying he is the “ betrayer” of the movement is likely what caused him to make such a veiled criticism as his analogy about the Tatars and the Palestinians.

CONCLUSION

In *The Betrayers* , the characters continually interrogate their own positions on Zionism’s key tenets, pinning the movement’s idealist origins against the reality of governing a militarized nation threatened by internal and external conflict. However, this is where the author leans into an overly-simplistic and self-serving Zionist viewpoint by using Kotler as a committed Zionist character to voice these opinions, without seriously considering a Palestinian viewpoint. Due to this refusal to dig deeper into the tangled nationalist motivations and moral dilemmas of contemporary Zionism, that then leaves the novel with a somewhat stilted tone as the reader yearns for more dimension.

Works Cited

- Bezmozgis, David. *The Betrayers: A Novel* . 1st Canadian Ed., Harper Collins, 2014.