



SHALOM HARTMAN מכון  
INSTITUTE שלום הרטמן

# iEngage Together & Apart

Unit Five  
Nationalism

# Why Talk about Nationalism?

The debate around nationalism is a critical debate which will impact the viability of Jewish peoplehood and Jewish unity. Israel and Zionism are intimately connected to the idea of nationalism, with Israel defining itself as the nation-state of the Jewish people. If Israeli Jews are principally nationalists and many North American Jews reject the category altogether, we face a schism of potentially momentous proportions. This session will explore whether nationalism itself is inherently corrupt, or whether it is a category that is often abused today by ultra-Nationalists.



## Definition of Nationalism:

- Nationalism entails **loyalty** for, **devotion** toward, or **identification** with one's own nation, and **support** for its interests.
- Such support involves the **prioritization** of some of these interests over the interests of those who do not belong to one's nation.
- In addition, nationalism involves the belief that the sovereign state is a **morally legitimate** and necessary **political framework** where members or citizens distribute to each other goods and pursue, protect, and cultivate their identity, values, and culture.



# Nations Prioritize!

Citizenship  
Health Care  
Education  
Welfare



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# Distinction between Nationalism and Fascism

**Fascism** embraces the exalting of one's nation/race above others and legitimizes the support for its interests to the ***exclusion*** and ***discrimination*** of all others.



## Prioritization must have boundaries

Nationalism cannot entail the complete and total exclusion and discrimination against all others who are not fellow citizens.

To do so is to move from nationalism to ultra-nationalism to fascism.



That a nation at times differentiates and prioritizes its needs over those of others is **self-evident**. Our moral intuitions legitimize such policies, just as we see it as self-evident that parents have greater moral responsibility to prioritize the needs of their own children.

The act of prioritization is indispensable to most of our moral and political decisions.

But this type of prioritization involves distinguishing between as distinct from discriminating against.

The core question that we now face is not the question of the legitimacy of encumberedness, but its *consequences and boundaries*.



## Jewish Case for Nationalism: The Encumbered Self

Michael Sandel: *“We are claimed by moral ties beyond universal humanity.”*

**“Encumbered Self”** = Duties you owe to a member group beyond universal humanity; moral obligations bound up with membership (like family or city or nation). This is not prejudice.

**“Encumbered”** means to be *restricted or burdened*.

In Judaism, this does not carry a negative connotation! Judaism defines the essence of humanity and the foundation of human relationships through this notion of encumberedness.





## Genesis 4:9

The Lord said to Cain: “Where is your brother Abel?” and he said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?”

הַשִּׁמְרָא אֶחָי אֲנִי:



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**Benedict Anderson, “Imagined Communities” (1983)**

*“The fellow members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of the communion.”*



1. The locus of criticism against nationalism is found in the question of prioritization of national interests over the interest of others.
2. To respond to this criticism, it is essential to define national interests.

## “Menschlicht” Nationalism

**Self-Interest has many meanings:**

- **Physical safety and prosperity**
- **Spiritual and moral aspiration**
- **Sacrifice for a greater purpose**



## Enduring Understandings:

1. Nationalism has become a polarizing and divisive issue within the Jewish community today.
2. In order to maintain a unified Jewish people which recognizes the value of a modern nation state for the Jewish people, we need to distinguish between nationalism and ultra-nationalism or fascism.
3. All nations prioritize the needs of members for the purpose of allocating resources and protection.
4. There is a difference between morally legitimate prioritization of national members and immoral discrimination against all others.
5. A Jewish case for nationalism emerges from our biblical stories of encumberedness, which teach the central value of responsibility and care for members of our people.
6. The essential moral challenge to nationalism is the boundary of loyalty and the distinction between prioritization and discrimination.

