

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF ZIONISM:

Vision and Reality — Reality and Vision

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As the national liberation feature of Zionism comes to a close, it is time to turn to the historical, Judaic vision of Zionism. Each component—the Hebrew language, the Jewish religious tradition, and the land of Israel—must become operative principles of Jewish life. Then Zionism can become a unifying factor, creating a sense of Jewish peoplehood with a common heritage and a common destiny.

Two guiding principles serve as the frame of reference for this article: (1) the vision and the reality of Zionism must be viewed as an historic continuum, and (2) there always has been and continues to be a mutual intrinsic relationship between Jews in the Diaspora and Jews in Eretz Yisrael concerning the vision of Zionism and its fulfillment.

The term "Zionism" was first used in 1892 by Nathan Birnbaum at a meeting in Vienna (Laquer, 1972). Yet, the concept of Zionism is another matter. The idea of Zionism is thirty-eight times older than the anniversary of the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. It is as old as the Jewish people, and even older. According to the first Rashi commentary on the Pentateuch, the Zionist vision was fashioned by the Almighty at the time of the creation of the world when He declared that the land to be conquered by the Israelites rightfully belongs to them because the Creator of all the lands bequeathed Eretz Israel to the children of Israel (Genesis 1:1).

Jews throughout the ages prayed for the day they would occupy this land as a nation. The hope of returning to their ancestral homeland was first expressed 2,500 years ago by

Jews exiled to Babylonia. And, since that time, Jews, young and old, would recite before grace after their weekday meals: "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat and cried when we remembered Zion" (Psalms 137:1).

THE VISION OF ZIONISM AND MESSIANISM

The vision of Zionism, expressed as the coming of the Messiah, suffuses the entire Judaic tradition. It was this fervent belief that lightened the yoke of exile for generations. So strong was the messianic belief that no less a rabbinic luminary than the Hatam Sofer at the beginning of the nineteenth century required his students to study the legal portions of the Talmud applicable only in Eretz Yisrael, such as the *halakhot* relating to *yovel* and *shmitah* and the regulations concerning *korbanot* that would become operative with the rebuilding of the Temple once the Messiah arrived.

While Jews lived physically in the Diaspora for two thousand years, emotionally and spiritually they resided in Eretz Yisrael. Twelfth-century Judah Halevi's poetic outcry captures the profound vision of the Zionist tradition of two millennia when he proclaimed: "My heart is in the East; but I am in the far end of the West." And, as a good Zionist, Halevi made *aliyah* to the Holy Land.

To be sure, messianic fervor and biblical belief in the Promised Land a Zionist do not make. What is needed is the combination of

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personal desire and actual involvement to make *Shivat Zion* a reality. The many exilic examples of belief *coupled* with willingness and personal participation in the redemption process "prove that [modern] Zionism had an impressive genealogy in Jewish history and that it was but the awakening of an ever imminent national spirit acknowledged by Jews and Gentiles alike" (Sokolow, 1969).

According to a recent study of Zionist ideology, the common denominator of modern Zionist visions comprises four major propositions (Shimon, 1996).

1. Jews are a distinctive entity possessing attributes associated with the *modern* concept of nation, as well as attributes associated with religion.
2. The situation of the Jewish entity under conditions of dispersion is critically defective.
3. The solution ranges from the ingathering and settlement of Jews in Eretz Yisrael under conditions of religious and cultural autonomy to the more radical aspiration for a sovereign Jewish state and the gathering therein of a major part of the Jewish people.
4. The fulfillment of the visions involve Jewish self-help; the renewal of national self-respect, morale, and culture; settlement in Eretz Yisrael; and diplomatic activity to facilitate such settlement.

If we examine these criteria for defining *modern* Zionism we must conclude that Zionist activity did take place over the centuries. Although the main strands of modern Zionism are essentially secular, its historical antecedents were religiously rooted and messianically motivated.

Whether moved by religious fervor, concerned primarily with the alleviation of distress, or driven by feelings of national pride, the efforts to settle in Eretz Yisrael or to make it a homeland for Jews are Zionist activities. In Ben Gurion's words, the Jewish right to Eretz Yisrael "emanates from the unbroken connection of the Hebrew nation with its

historic homeland" (quoted in Shimon, 1996). That unbroken connection is the historic Zionist link.

A dramatic story about Shmuel Yosef Agnon expressed the power of the Zionist vision. During the ceremony when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, Agnon was asked where he was born. His response startled his listeners. "My parents gave birth to me in P'chach, Galicia" he said, "but like all Jews, I was born in Jerusalem." After the King of Sweden, who asked him the question, expressed his amazement at his answer, Agnon explained: "Physically I was born in Galicia, but my spiritual birth was in Israel. Were it not for the spirit of Jerusalem (*Yirushalayim shel ma'alah*) that pervaded my home, I never would have studied Judaica, I never would have mastered Hebrew, I never would have become a Hebrew writer, I never would have made *aliyah*; and I would not be here to receive the Nobel Prize." Agnon's response was the epitome of the fulfillment of a Zionist dream.

The dual aspiration of Zionism is expressed poignantly in the daily *amidah*, by (1) the prayers for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the speedy renewal of "the kingdom of David," a clear reference to the Davidic Messiah, and (2) by the prayer for freedom from exilic oppression and persecution. For the Jewish masses throughout the ages, the national purpose of the Jewish religion was reinforced by the reality of Jew-hatred and persecution.

MODERN ZIONIST PROPHECY AND REALITY

After being elected as the first President of the World Zionist Organization, at the first Zionist Congress, Theodore Herzl, the modern prophet of Zionism, wrote in his diary: "If I were to sum up the Congress in a word, it would be this: At Basel, I founded the Jewish State. If I said this aloud today, I would be greeted by universal laughter. In five years, perhaps, and certainly in fifty, everyone will see it" (quoted in Parzen, 1962).

Fifty-one years later, the prophecy is a

reality. But the father of the modern Jewish state did not guarantee its welfare or its Jewish character. The establishment of a modern Jewish state by no means suggested the fulfillment of all Zionist aspirations. The fledgling state had to be safeguarded against Arab terrorism and warfare. It had to be supported economically. It had to be made a viable homeland for hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants. It had to develop a distinct Jewish character and continue the Jewish people's national, cultural and Hebraic renaissance. Finally, it had to develop the ability to disseminate Jewish culture and Jewish consciousness and reinforce the idea of Jewish peoplehood.

Preceding Herzl in the nineteenth century were the ideological precursors of modern Zionism. Their visions varied significantly, but their solutions to the problems of Jewish exilic existence had one element in common: a physical space over which Jews ruled. Chief among the precursors were two rabbis—a Balkan Sephardic Jew, Yehudah Alkalai, and an East European talmudic scholar, Zvi Hirsch Kalischer, each of whom developed plans and advocated for the physical, cultural, and linguistic restoration of the Jewish people to its homeland.

The Jewish national vision was not accepted by all Jews at the time modern Zionism was being fashioned. Reform Judaism in the nineteenth century rejected the vision of Jewish nationalism as antithetical to its belief system, which held that Jews were members of the Mosaic faith whose allegiance centered only around the synagogue (Shimon, 1996). The extreme ultra-Orthodox Jews, while strong in their belief in the Jews' eventual return to Eretz Yisrael, repudiated modern Zionism since they felt it involved the violation of sacred Judaic principles and practices. And then there were the assimilationists who retained a superficial identification with the Jews but rejected the practices of Judaism. Their vision of individual and group emancipation, unlike that of the Zionists, was total integration into their respective European societies.

From Assimilation to Zionism

For Moses Hess, the Marxist Socialist ideologue who advocated assimilation and later realized that "even conversion itself does not relieve the Jew from the enormous pressure of German Jew-hatred," increasing anti-Semitism resulted in a turn to a Zionist solution for the Jewish problem (Shimon, 1996).

Another example of an assimilationist-turned-Zionist was Leon Pinsker, a devout leader of a failed movement to russify Russian Jews. In his biting pamphlet, *Auto Emancipation*, which appeared in 1882, he emphasized that Jews must emancipate themselves from *galut* by becoming a nation like other nations, and by attaining a territory—not necessarily Eretz Yisrael—to achieve nationhood.

Herzl was an assimilationist who literally was shocked into becoming a Zionist. Were it not for his assignment to cover the Dreyfus trial, who knows whether there would be a Jewish state today. It could very well be that the Jewish people would have had to continue to exist in the post-Holocaust era as a nation in exile.

Zionism and Haskalah

The vision of modern Zionism embraced the thinking of the *maskilim*, the intelligentsia who revolted against the ghetto and, at the same time rejected Jewish religion and abandoned the synagogue. The *maskilim* laid the foundation for secular Zionism and were responsible for the rebirth of the Hebrew language. The flowering of Hebrew literature and Hebraic journalism in Eastern Europe during the last two decades of the nineteenth century went hand-in-hand with the renaissance of Jewish nationalism.

MODERN THEORIES: POLITICAL, PRACTICAL, AND CULTURAL ZIONISM

It is no accident that, since both Pinsker and Herzl became Zionists out of existential

necessity, their goals, their visions, were political and social. Early in Herzl's efforts, he was ready to settle for Argentina and later for Uganda. Both times he was persuaded by Zionists motivated by historical and cultural purposes to consider only Palestine as the land of the Jewish people. Under his leadership, the vision of political Zionism dominated the first Zionist Congress when the World Zionist Organization was established. The official program of Zionism simply read: "The aim of Zionism is to create a publicly recognized and legally secured home for the Jewish people in Palestine." The operative clauses to obtain this objective were essentially political, economic, and social. They included the promotion of the settlement of Palestine by Jewish farmers, laborers, and artisans; the organization of world Jewry into local and general bodies in conformity with the laws of their respective countries; the strengthening of Jewish sentiment and national consciousness; and the initiation of steps to attain such government assistance as may be necessary for achieving the aims of Zionism (Parzen, 1962).

One of the stalwart Zionists who joined hands with Pinsker in the formation of small Zionist groups was Ahad Ha'am, whose vision of Zionism differed radically from Herzl. Ahad Ha'am viewed assimilation and *not* persecution as the greatest threat facing modern Jewry. To him, the Zionist vision was needed to regenerate the spiritual life of the Jews and help them face the challenges that modern societies posed to Jewish survival. In his pointed essay, *Lo zeh Haderekh*, which he wrote after visiting the new colonies, he bitterly criticized the lack of cultural purpose in the colonization effort of the new immigrants in Palestine. Colonization, he posited, requires a spiritual-cultural dimension and a Hebraic linguistic emphasis. Consequently, he promoted the idea of Jewish national education as a prerequisite for *aliyah*. Otherwise, he felt that the Jewish people could not build in Palestine the Jewish national cultural center it needed to survive as a nation on its own land.

During the first two decades of modern Zionism, the political purposes clearly overshadowed the vision of the cultural and religious Zionists and even the goals of the practical Zionists. The Zionist vision of the practicalists, who challenged Herzl and confronted him with an ultimatum to abandon his designs regarding Uganda, was to reclaim Eretz Yisrael by settlement and practical work.

Over time, the vision of the practicalists triumphed in the securing and building a homeland for the Jewish people. In large part, this was insured by the Second Aliyah brought about by the failure of the October Revolution in Russia in 1905 and the resultant pogroms. The Second Aliyah *olim* were dedicated to implementing *Torat Ha'avodah*, the work vision of Aharon David Gordon. The natural outcome of a labor philosophy was the founding of the *Histadrut*, whose dominant leader was David Ben Gurion.

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ZIONISM AND OUR HEBREW LANGUAGE

To Ben-Gurion and his colleagues, the revival of the Hebrew language was an integral part of the Zionist vision. The battle for Hebrew as the language of instruction at the

newly founded Haifa Technion, in which Eliezer Ben Yehuda and his associates engaged between 1912 and 194, is an aggressive expression of this aspect of the Zionist vision. It involved Jewish leadership the world over, including American Zionists headed by Rabbi Stephen Wise and Professor Richard Gottheil who avidly promoted the study and use of the Hebrew language in every area of life in Palestine. To them, Hebrew was basic to the Zionist vision.

In his study, *Halashon Ha'Ivrit be Yisrael U-Va-Amin*, Dr. Simon Federbush (1967) writes eloquently of the fulfillment of this vision:

The revival of our Hebrew language, which accompanied the beginning of our national redemption, is one of the world's miraculous phenomena. The amazement of the nations of the earth regarding this happening, for which there is no parallel in any country or language, was expressed by one of the world's righteous people: If the survival of the Jewish nation is a miracle, then the revival of the Hebrew language is the miracle of miracles.

American Role in Modern Zionism

The contribution of American Zionists is underscored by the fact that no less than 78 settlements in Israel bear the names of American Jews. American Zionism is actually a success story. When it began, it did not generate much popular support and enthusiasm. Indeed, it had its share of opponents and detractors. According to Jewish Theological Seminary Professor Jack Wertheimer, the problem now is that "since the triumph of Zionism seems so all-encompassing (there are virtually no anti-Zionist or even non-Zionist organizations in America), it no longer represents a fighting cause that inspires American Jews."

A THREE-PART PROGRAM FOR ISRAEL AND THE DIASPORA

In contemplating the future of Zionism in America and Israel we begin with the fact that, most likely, during the next decade the

vision of the ingathering of exiles—with the last immigration from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia—will have been fully realized (Carmen, 1992). And as the national liberation feature of Zionism comes to a close, we must turn to the historic, Judaic vision of Zionism. The restoration of Eretz Yisrael to a prominent place in Jewish life does not ease the search and struggle for Jewish identity, either in Israel or in the Diaspora.

Historically, Zionism is based upon three Judaic components: language, religion, and territory. Heinrich Graetz, the prolific nineteenth-century historian, emphasizes that "The Torah, the nation of Israel and the Holy Land stand...in a mystical relationship to each other; they are inseparably united by a mystical bond" (quoted in Shimon, 1996). And according to historian Jacob Katz (1986, p. 90), Jewish nationalism "is the transforming of ethnic facts into ultimate values." This transformation posits a major challenge to Israel and to Zionism as both the State and the operative concept that brought it about struggle for ultimate meaning. To achieve the ultimate values of Zionism in the post-Zionist period, each of the components—language, religion, and territory—must become operative principles of Jewish life.

Hebrew Language

The Hebrew language must become, once again, a functional unifying factor of world Jewry, an ever-ready presence of Jewish peoplehood. What a challenge this poses to Jewish Zionist leadership and to Jewish educators! Sadly, the Israel Ministry of Education's 1994 Shenhar Report, which addressed the "ongoing decline of the status of Jewish Studies at all levels of the educational system," noted "a paradoxical change in the status of the Hebrew language: the more it has become the dominant language and culture, the more it has become distant from the language of the Bible and religious writings. Once the key to general and Jewish education, it has now become a separate subject, isolated from other (Judaic) disciplines" (Shenhar Report, 1994). Israeli writer

and thinker, Yosef Dan (1994), in a lengthy article in *Ha'Aretz*, bemoans the absolute secularization of the Hebrew language, which is contrary to the Jewish continuity needs of the Jewish people. "So much literary creativity in Israel," he underscores, "does not draw an iota from the Bible, Mishnah, Gemara, Jewish philosophy, Kabbalah, Hasidut or even from the classical literary works of modern Hebrew literature." This condition requires a Zionist response. It challenges the Israeli education system to develop a comprehensive, integrative approach to the Hebrew language, restoring to it its traditional cultural sources.

It is precisely because Hebrew is so crucial to Jewish continuity and so basic to meaningful Jewish existence and to Jewish unity that the American Advisory Council of the Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education, with the Department of Education and Culture in the Diaspora, has established a National Hebrew Language Center. The level of the Center's effectiveness will be a measure of the success of both American Zionist and Jewish educational leadership and activity. The challenge of Hebrew language in all its formats—biblical, liturgical, rabbinic, literary, and conversational—is what motivated me to write my book *The Mystique of Hebrew* (Schiff, 1996).

Jewish Religious Tradition

The second component of Zionism is the Judaic religious tradition, which can be broadly interpreted to include the ideas and experiences associated with spirituality, ritual observance, human values, and cultural and national involvement. The concept of Judaic religious tradition being at the heart of Zionism may be anathema to many secular Zionists today as it was to many *maskilim* in Europe. Yet, the current challenge of religion to post-Zionism and to Israel is to enhance the Jewish character of the Jewish communities in the Diaspora and in Israel.

Ahad Ha'am, the secularist, shared with religious Zionism the definition of the Zion-

ist challenge as not so much a response to the "problem of the Jews" as it is an answer to the "problem of Judaism." The search for a resolution to this problem must be at the heart of Zionist endeavor in the post-Zionist era. Secularism has exacerbated the dilemma of whether Israel can be both democratic and Jewish at the same time. This dilemma has given rise to the statement of the new president of Israel's Supreme Court to the effect that "if he had to choose between an Israel that is Jewish but not democratic and an Israel that is democratic but not Jewish, he would prefer an Israel that is democratic and not Jewish." In this case, Jacob Chinitz (1996, p. 3) notes, "We have an open acknowledgement by a major leader of Israeli society, that the Jewishness of Israel is secondary, not primary, and can no longer serve as the *raison d'être* of the State."

Zionism today must embrace Judaism and Jewishness, as well as Jewish nationalism, as its goal for the Jewish future in the Diaspora and in Israel. In this sense, we are not truly in an era of post-Zionism. If Zionism is rooted in the Jewish past and continues to be invigorated by Jewish tradition, it becomes an eternal philosophy guiding the destiny of the Jewish state and the future of the Jewish people. As Hebrew University Professor Michael Rosenak (1992, p. 17) notes, "The significance of Eretz Yisrael was intrinsically bound up with the significance of biblical and talmudic Judaism." And, so it must be now, even as we differ in our interpretation and application of biblical and talmudic Judaism to our modern times.

The poet Bialik expressed this intrinsic link poignantly in his memorable poem, *Im yesh et naf-shekha la-da'at*, describing the study of Judaic sources as the fountain from which the Jewish people drew strength and courage in their bitter exile. Indeed, Torah study, broadly defined, is a cardinal principle of the Jewish faith, the importance of which must be incorporated in the Zionist vision and reality of the Jewish future in the Diaspora and in Israel.

Centrality of Israel

Territory, the third leg of the Zionist idea, means much more than a physical space to house the Jewish people. It means that Eretz Yisrael, the homeland, is the home of Judaism in which its Jewish inhabitants feel at home with Jewishness. It means, that after its founding, Israel becomes a major cultural center, a major cultural force for Jewish life everywhere. "From Zion shall go forth the Torah" can be a realistic vision for the Jewish future.

The vast majority of Israelis believe in the exclusive centrality of Israel. For most Israeli Zionists, *aliyah* is the necessary condition of Zionism. In contrast, most American Jews tend to view the Jewish world as having at least two centers, Israel and America. For most Diaspora Jews, even for religious Jews, *galut* does not exist as they live in a variety of free, blessed settings.

This divergence of views poses a challenge to Zionism of the future to help both communities better understand each other. The center and the periphery have much to teach each other, if only, as Professor Arnold Eisen (1992, p. 82) notes, "they would learn to speak in a way which the other is prepared to hear." In responding appropriately, Zionism can become a unifying factor in creating a sense of Jewish peoplehood with a common heritage and a common destiny, which is, after all, the concept of Am Yisrael true to the covenantal idea of Jewish life.

Jewish togetherness is expressed in the very first act of modern Jewish nationhood. The Declaration of Israel's Independence underscores that the Jews of Palestine and the Jews of the Diaspora "met together in solemn assembly to declare the establishment of the Jewish State." That togetherness must be at

the core of the Zionist vision today and tomorrow.

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