

ZIONISM, RACE, AND THE GREAT ZIONIST RACIALIST NOVEL

Mark Gelber

The Zionist movement arose at a time when racial science and racialist discourses were becoming more and more securely established in the Western world. While this naturally set the stage for the enlistment of racial science in the Zionist cause, there seems to have been a widespread reluctance among political Zionists to exploit the rhetoric of race or to adopt it unreservedly. Despite the fact that there were some strongly committed racialist thinkers and activists such as Arthur Ruppin, who held influential positions in the World Zionist Organization, Zionism as a movement neither formulated a racial political philosophy nor instituted racial policy.

Nevertheless, it is fair to say that a racialist orientation was fundamental to Central European cultural Zionism. Ahad Ha'am by and large avoided the rhetoric of race and only rarely incorporated racialist perspectives or rhetoric into his Hebraic cultural or spiritual Zionist polemics. However, Nathan Birnbaum, a pre-Herzlian Jewish nationalist from Vienna who propounded his own distinctive version of cultural Zionism, saw things differently. Birnbaum argued in favor of the potent cultural capacity of the Jewish nation, based

to a large degree on its positive racial characteristics.

This capacity could be actualized through Zionism and then, according to Birnbaum, utilized in order to transmit European civilization

to Asia and Africa. In theory, the Jewish nation reconstituted in its homeland would function as a cultural force mediating between Eastern and Western racial groups for the benefit of humanity. It is important to emphasize that the rhetoric of race here as elsewhere within the Zionist movement was

COMPLEMENTING THE POLEMICAL LITERATURE, RACIAL ELEMENTS AND RACIAL PERSPECTIVES NATURALLY MADE THEIR WAY INTO CULTURAL ZIONIST LITERATURE AND ART, PROVIDING IMPORTANT CATEGORIES FOR THE CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF JEWISH AESTHETIC PRODUCTION WITHIN THE REALM OF CULTURAL ZIONISM.

for the most part racialist in nature and not racist, if I may be permitted to make this distinction. In other words, the lively discussion about race in cultural Zionist polemical literature normally presented a view of racial difference and uniqueness within the overall framework of the equality of races and the shared capacity of all humans to develop their own potentialities within racial groupings. Racialist formulations which tended toward racism and claims of the racial superiority of one race over others were generally absent.

The notion of a distinct Jewish racial identity served to reinforce the idea of a unique Jewish national identity. In order to construct and

to corroborate the idea of a separate Jewish nation, nationalist thinkers sought to validate the notion of a modern and secular Jewish national identity untethered from traditional religious conceptions of Jewishness. Race could be employed purposefully in this context. At the same time, acceptance of the racial argument helped to reinforce the case against Jewish assimilation and integration into "foreign" racial-national groups. As it turned out, this argument also appealed to non-Jewish observers who were sympathetic to Zionism and its various cultural expressions precisely because they made a strong case for Jewish national difference that indicated the necessity of

concomitant political and social exclusionary measures.

The issue of racial purity turned out to be neutral in this regard, since there were those cultural Zionists, like Birnbaum, who viewed the Jewish people as a product of racial admixture, and others, like Heinrich Loewe of Berlin, who believed in

fundamental Jewish racial purity. In fact, they represented different streams within cultural Zionism, which was able to accommodate both as part of a larger discussion. Contemporary scientific (*sic*) literature on the Jewish race was similarly full of disagreements about the issue of purity, as it was with regard to other contentious topics related to race.

Complementing the polemical literature, racial elements and racial perspectives naturally made their way into cultural Zionist literature and art, providing important categories for the critical analysis of Jewish aesthetic production within the realm of cultural Zionism. Poetry which celebrated the "Jewish

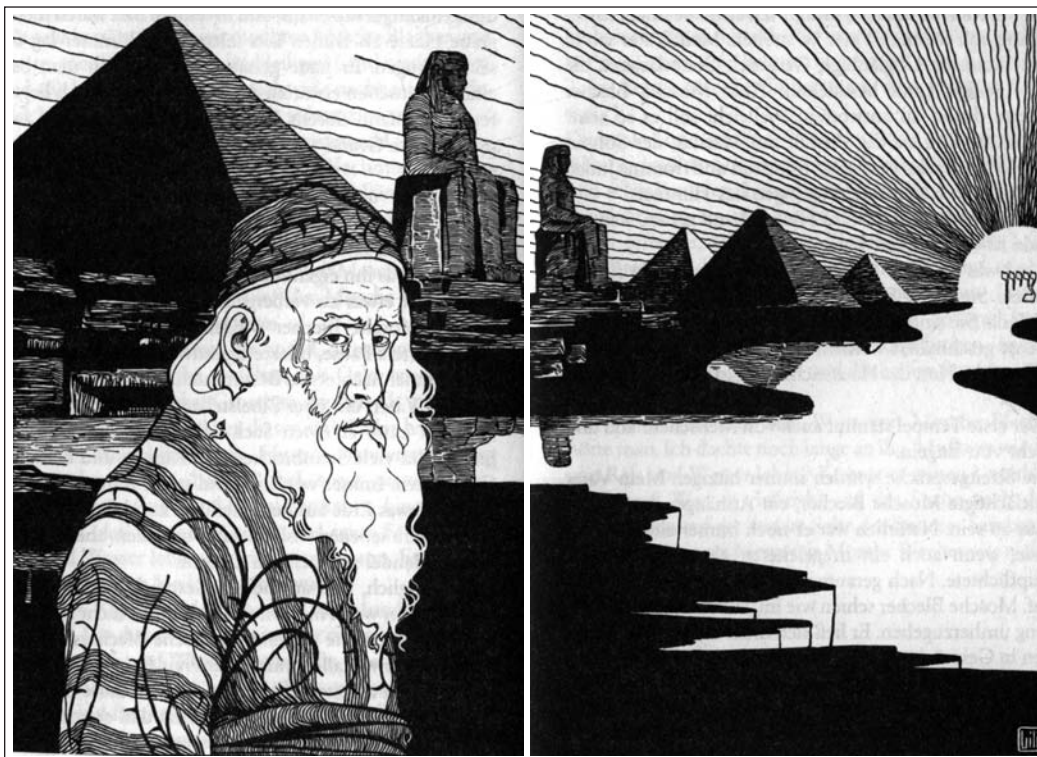
blood” and its potentialities became a focal point of interest in Zionist circles. For example, Richard Beer-Hofmann’s poem “*Schlaflied für Mirjam*” (1897, Lullaby for Miriam) stimulated great interest in this regard, especially its arresting lines: “. . . and blood in us deep/ Flows from those past to those yet to be, Blood of our Fathers, restless and proud.” Furthermore, Zionist art criticism attempted to discern the particularist Jewish racial characteristics of artwork created by Jewish artists. In the case of a

Jewish-nationally conscious artist like E. M. Lilien, who identified with Zionism and chose Biblical and other Jewish-related topics for his artwork, the recourse to the rhetoric of race in the critical commentary appears to be appropriate, uncomplicated, and even natural. This same critical tendency, however, is characteristic of the cultural Zionist appreciation of artwork unrelated to Jewish themes or created by artists who failed to evidence Jewish-nationalist leanings or consciousness, despite their indisputable Jewish racial connection. One thinks of Max Liebermann or Camille Pissarro in this context; both were appropriated by cultural Zionism in this sense, even if this appropriation process appears in retrospect to have been problematical, strained, or clumsy.

It is in this light that we must consider the emergence of the great Zionist racist novel. As a genre, the Zionist novel manifests several general tendencies. Herzl’s *Altneuland* (1902, Old-New Land), which can be regarded as

paradigmatic, highlights the transformation of an alienated, decadent, disinterested, disillusioned, acculturated Jewish male intellectual into a self-conscious member of the Jewish nation, perhaps as a sign of a burgeoning commitment both to life and to the future of the nation. In the Zionist racist novel, an additional factor comes into play. Within the development of the plot, this same protagonist-type eventually comes to realize Jewish racial belonging and a new responsibility

The development of Jewish racial consciousness and the actualization of Zionist ideology are combined polemically in the great Zionist racist novel, *René Richter, Die Entwicklung eines modernen Juden* (1906, René Richter, The Development of a Modern Jew). The work was written by Lothar Brieger, an interesting if forgotten participant in the early cultural Zionist scene in Berlin, and it deserves to be read as the seminal fictional text of racist Zionism despite its numerous aesthetic flaws,



Passah [Passover] by Ephraim Moses Lilien. Reprinted from Börries Freiherr von Münchhausen and E.M. Lilien, *Juda* (Berlin: E. Fleischel, 1900).

to race is expressed, based on the blood relationship to one’s ancestors. For example, in a novel by Beer-Hofmann, *Der Tod Georgs* (1900, The Death of George), the protagonist overcomes his decadent passivity by unexpectedly affirming life and his Jewish heritage. Arriving at an awareness of the proud and ancient blood flowing in his veins, he realizes a new sense of self, based on the perception of the deepest layers of his soul and their historical roots in the Jewish racial experience.

improbabilities, and fundamental lack of verisimilitude. In the novel, the racial aspect acquires primacy because the narrative perspective and narrative voice are essentially racist. Also, before the protagonist comes to identify with Jewish nationalism, he becomes convinced of the primacy of his Jewish racial identity. Thus, the novel justifies Jewish nationalism and Zionism by the pragmatic role they can play in terms of Jewish racial preservation and development.

The Zionist novel tends to differentiate between diverse Jewish types, usually in order to facilitate the identification of the Jewish enemy “within,” who can be just as pernicious an enemy of the people, as the despicable anti-Semite “without.” In Brieger’s work, the inner Jewish differentiation is predicated on racial purity. Thus, the novel posits the existence of a Jewish aristocracy—a “Jewry within Jewry”—based on inbreeding and an ideal of tradition. In a totally fantastic sequence, René Richter traces his genealogy back several centuries and discovers that he is a descendant of the Biblical tribe of Benjamin, which produced the first Jewish king. According to the fiction, this aristocratic tribe instinctively safeguarded its racial purity throughout the ages. Some common ground with racial anti-Semitism is established, or at least some of the anti-Semitic argumentation leads the protagonist to affirm his Jewish racial self and eventually to become proud of his racial lineage. The enemy envisioned in the novel, of the Aryan race as well as the Jewish race, is racial admixture itself. Thus, René Richter learns that his blond hair, tinged with red, is a sign of the racial elite; supposedly, the elite caste of every race, including the Jewish race, is blond-haired. In Brieger’s novel, the Jewish aristocrat appears to share more in terms of racial characteristics with the Prussian aristocracy than with other Jewish types, which are inferior and tend towards assimilation and racial attenuation and disappearance.

Late in Brieger’s novel, the protagonist gravitates to Zionist

circles and he subsequently embraces the cause enthusiastically. This sequence is complemented by the depiction of a new and healthy love relationship and marriage between him and a childhood sweetheart, who had patiently remained true to him through the years. This relationship is based partially on the racial compatibility of the pair, since she can also trace her lineage to fine Jewish stock. On one occasion he explains his love for her as follows: “I love her because the blood of the same race flows in our veins, because our ideals are namely these [racial].” Zionism, in the novel, is depicted as a movement which aims to reorganize the Jewish race, to detach it from an enervating struggle with the Aryans in Europe, and to reunify the dispersed Jewish racial strains in the ancestral homeland. Its ultimate goal is to rejuvenate the race and build a new Jewish empire based on the principle of race, in harmony with the ancestral land and in beneficial proximity to other Semitic tribes. By dedicating their lives to the ideal of race in the land of Israel (and while working the land), René Richter and his wife serve a higher goal to the benefit of humanity. They accept the duty and privilege of laying the groundwork for the eventual arrival of the Jewish masses, who will come sooner or later, as the host countries inevitably expel their Jewish residents.

Whereas anti-Semitism in eastern Europe served to preserve the racial purity of much of its Jewry, it simultaneously threatened the continued existence of the nation. The novel suggests that only the Zionist idea can provide a solution

to the racial dilemma at the heart of the Jewish question in Europe. The last scene of the novel depicts the young couple on board an ocean steamer, having dissolved their Berlin household and having said their last good-byes to Europe, confident in happy anticipation of the future of the regeneration of the Jewish race and the Jewish renaissance in Zion.

Judging from its unenthusiastic reception and commercial failure, Brieger’s great Zionist racialist novel does not appear to have resonated well with early twentieth-century Zionist and non-Zionist, or Jewish and non-Jewish, readers. Perhaps the unhappy fate of the novel can be traced to its aesthetic demerits rather than to its specific ideological position, since other evidence shows that the racial Zionist position continued to be popular up to the end of World War I. Nevertheless, racialism decidedly lost its appeal within Zionism sometime in the 1920s; only a few, isolated figures and publications continued to trumpet this ideology in subsequent years. Consequently, this entire literature, including its poetry and the great Zionist racial novel, disappeared from Jewish consciousness, even before racial ideologies were totally discredited following the tragic experience of Europe and Jewry during the Nazi era.

Mark Gelber is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature and German-Jewish Studies at Ben-Gurion University, Beer Sheva. He is the author of Melancholy Pride: Nation, Race, and Gender in the German Literature of Cultural Zionism (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 2000).

To advertise in AJS Perspectives, please contact the AJS office by e-mail at ajs@ajs.cjh.org or by telephone at (917) 606-8249. Visit our website at www.ajsnet.org for prices and specifications.