

Louis D. Brandeis: Zionist Leader

BRANDEIS REVIEW 11.3 (winter 1992)

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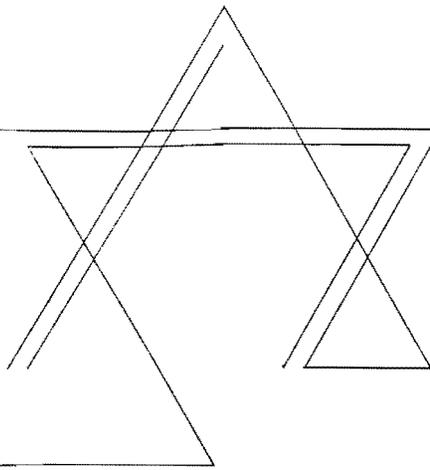
"The work for Zionism," Justice Louis D. Brandeis wrote to his mother-in-law on December 20, 1917, "has seemed to me, on the whole, the most worthwhile of all I have attempted." The justice penned these words at a moment of great rejoicing. The British army had just captured Jerusalem from the Turks and His Majesty's government had, only a few weeks before, issued the Balfour Declaration promising to "view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." Brandeis, who had devoted three eventful years to

leading the American Zionist movement, derived "great satisfaction" from both of these developments. Zionism, as he understood it, was "a movement to give the Jews...the land of their fathers where the Jewish life may be lived normally and naturally, and where the Jews can govern themselves and may in time hope to constitute a majority of the population and look forward to...home rule." The events of 1917, he believed, pointed toward the realization of these hopes.

Brandeis was a relative newcomer to the Zionist movement. Until he was well into his fifties, he had been far removed not only from Zionism

Brandeis during his only trip to Palestine in 1919

but from most other forms of active Jewish life. He maintained a few business associations with Jews, but did not live near other Jews, did not belong to any synagogue, gave only perfunctory gifts to Jewish charities and socialized largely with non-Jews. As a boy growing up in Louisville, he had experienced traditional Judaism at the home of his mother's brother, Lewis Dembitz, whom he revered and whose last name he adopted for his middle name. Yet he never himself took up any traditional



Jewish practices, and he remained, by his own admission, extraordinarily ignorant about Judaism's rites and precepts.

Why Brandeis came to "convert" to Zionism so late in life has been described, quite appropriately, as "an enduring mystery." True conversions are usually somewhat inscrutable, and in Brandeis's case all that can be said with absolute certainty is that the shift resulted from a complex series of remote and proximate causes, some of them conscious, some of them undoubtedly unconscious.

Brandeis's uncle and mentor, Lewis Dembitz, was an early supporter of Zionism; his wife, Alice Goldmark Brandeis, at least according to some family sources, likewise influenced him in a Zionist direction. Burgeoning anti-Semitism in Boston and Brandeis's own encounters with prejudice may also have affected his worldview, but to what extent is uncertain. Brandeis claimed in 1914 that his concern with Zionism stemmed from his role "in the adjustment of the great strike among the garment workers of New York in 1910." This mediation, which resulted in the signing of a famous "protocol of peace," brought him into contact with the East European Jewish masses, Jews of a type he had never encountered before. He was deeply impressed with their values ("within them there was a true democratic feeling and a deep appreciation of the elements of social justice"), and gradually they began to take the place in his mind of his former ideal, the Brahmins of Boston, with whom he had become disenchanted.

Already in a 1910 interview with the *Jewish Advocate*, Brandeis declared his warm sympathy for the Zionist cause, although he had yet to study the subject in depth. This he accomplished over the next few years, under the tutelage of such leading Zionists as Aaron Aaronsohn, Horace Kallen, Shmarya Levin, Bernard Rosenblatt, Nahum Sokolow, Stephen S. Wise and, above all, Jacob deHaas. The latter, whose August 13, 1912 meeting with Brandeis is so often seen as pivotal in transforming his Zionist predilections into a full-scale ideological commitment, became Brandeis's personal guide to Zionism and helped to propel him, on August 30, 1914, to the chairmanship of the Provisional Executive Committee for General Zionist Affairs.

When he did, finally, give his heart and soul to Zionism, Brandeis's leadership brought about an historic turning point in the movement's fortunes. Where before it had been restricted to a narrow circle of true believers, now it emerged as an effective political force. Brandeis helped to bring order into the Zionist camp, and, in good progressive fashion, he promoted the virtues of organizational efficiency, symbolized by the time clock that he had installed in the Zionist offices. He also helped the Zionist movement raise an unprecedented amount of money, including substantial sums from his own pockets. To the cause, he donated \$171,538 between 1914 and 1921 and a lifetime total (including half of his residual estate) of more than \$1.6 million.

Brandeis's importance, however, extended far beyond these administrative and charitable contributions. What really promoted the Zionist movement in America was his persona and mystique, his charm, fluency, sincerity and passion, the thrill of being part of a movement that he

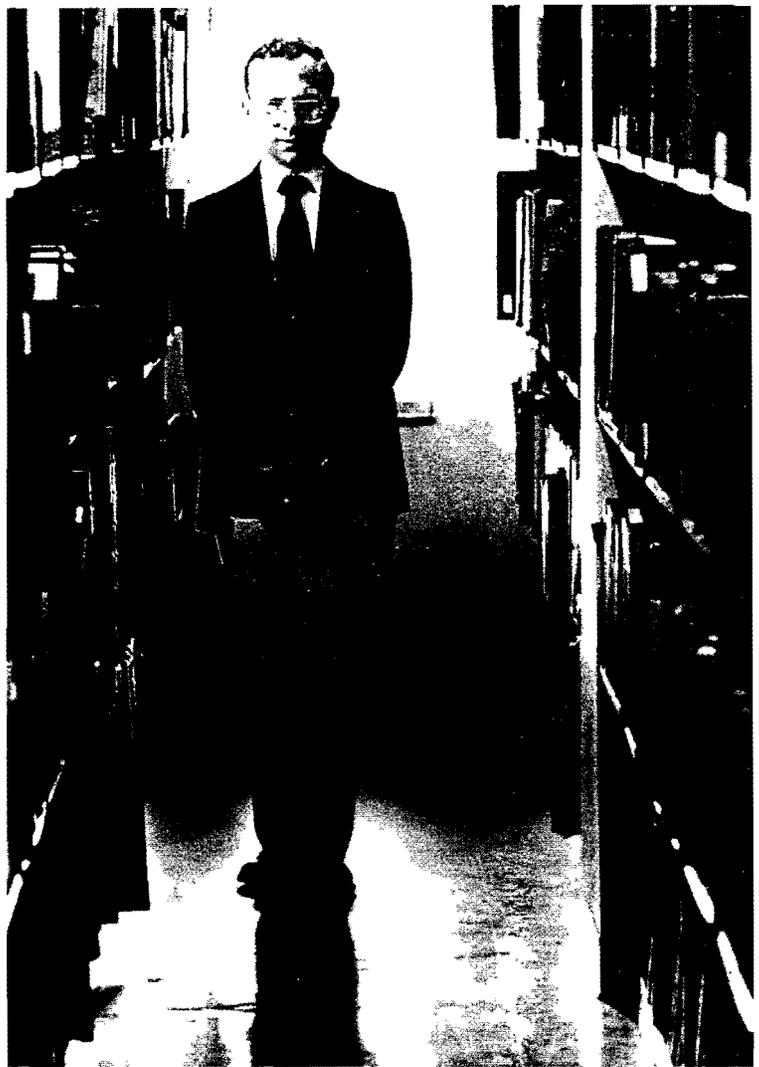
headed. Jacob deHaas captured the spirit of this personality cult (a cult that deHaas did much to encourage) in a sycophantic passage in which he described Brandeis as "a Jew who is keen to feel and think with his people and who the world over, has come to be known as Israel's greatest spiritual guide and most practical adviser in this generation...whose private office in Washington is a temple to which men and women make pilgrimages from all the ends of the earth." When Brandeis travelled on behalf of Zionism, his presence alone was usually sufficient to attract an audience. His prestige was such that when he appeared at the annual Zionist conventions, members of the audience spontaneously rose to their feet. They looked up to Brandeis as their prophet, compared him to Isaiah and pledged to him their abiding devotion and faithfulness.

Brandeis's formal leadership of the Zionist movement in America extended through seven memorable years, 1914-21. During this period, he barnstormed the country speaking out on Zionism's behalf, won for Zionism a host of significant new supporters, oversaw a dramatic if temporary rise in Zionist movement memberships and fund-raising, played a behind-the-scenes role in formulating and winning American acceptance of the Balfour Declaration (1917-18), helped to author what became the official program of the American Zionist movement, the so-called Pittsburgh Program (1918), undertook his first (and only) tour of Palestine (1919) and was elected honorary president of the World Zionist Organization (1920).

Early in his term, in July 1916, he officially stepped down from all of his positions in Zionist and Jewish organizations to avoid embarrassing the Supreme Court, of which he had just become a member. He continued, however, to serve in an honorary capacity and henceforward exercised overall authority from behind-the-scenes.

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reader, *People Walk on Their Heads*, a volume dealing with Jewish immigrant life in New York; *Jacksonian Jew*, a biography of Mordecai Noah that was nominated for the National Jewish Book Award; *JPS*, a history of the Jewish Publication Society; and, with Nancy Klein, *The Jews of Cincinnati*, a community history. Sarna is currently working on a documentary history of religion and state issues affecting American Jews, an interpretive history of American Judaism and an illustrated history of the Jews of Boston.



This arrangement continued until 1921. In that year, a long-simmering policy dispute between Brandeis and Chaim Weizmann, the great European Zionist leader, broke into the open. On the surface, the dispute focused around the European proposal to create a central financial agency for Palestine development, the Keren Hayesod, on a basis that Brandeis believed to be financially irresponsible. At a deeper level, however, the dispute highlighted far-reaching ideological and cultural differences between American and European-born Zionists and reflected both personal mistrust and sharp disagreements over Zionism's mission, priorities and administration. It also brought to the surface long-standing complaints against Brandeis's covert form of leadership and lack of full-time devotion to the Zionist cause. When delegates to the Zionist Organization of America convention, meeting in Cleveland in June 1921, sided with Weizmann on the Keren Hayesod issue, Brandeis and 37 of his chief loyalists resigned. "Our place is as humble

workers in the ranks," he declared in a subsequent letter.

Brandeis, of course, never did take his place as a "humble worker in the ranks." Instead, he and his stalwarts promoted the economic development of Palestine, supporting large and small projects designed to strengthen the industrial and agriculture base of the country. He became particularly close to young and in some cases radical Labor Zionists associated with Ha-Shomer Ha-Tzair in Palestine. Whatever he thought of the Marxism that some of them espoused, he was strongly drawn to their idealism. He also continued to follow developments within the American Zionist movement, and in the wake of the 1929 Hebron riots, the untimely passing of the great American Jewish leader Louis Marshall and the almost total collapse of the Zionist Organization of America under the maladministration of Louis Lipsky, he reemerged as a significant,

behind-the-scenes player in Zionist affairs. While he declined the official responsibility of leadership, pleading old age, he was generally consulted about major actions and decisions.

Chaim Weizmann, watching from abroad, was dismayed. "Brandeis is old," he wrote, "and remains enshrined in Washington like an ikon and waits for the worshippers to come and kneel before him. He is not in a position to do anything or to inspire anybody in such difficult times." The religious metaphor was apt, but the conclusion proved wide of the mark. In fact, Brandeis did inspire American Zionists—more so, indeed, than any other American Jewish leader. Being in Washington, he was also able to carry on important assignments for the Zionist movement, while his associates kept him constantly informed of developments elsewhere. As late as 1941, the last year of his life, more than half of the significant letters that he wrote (at least those that have been published) concerned Zionist affairs. One of these, a letter to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, expressed alarm over "the danger threatening the Jewish community in Palestine" and pleaded for "a word...to the British manifesting your desire to be assured that the Jews in Palestine will be afforded the necessary means for self-protection."

During his three decades as an American Zionist leader, Brandeis helped to transform the movement's image and identity. This may have been, in retrospect, his most important contribution to the cause: his success in (1) legitimating, (2) Americanizing and (3) idealizing Zionism's message. To be sure, his ideological approach to Zionism was not original. Such thinkers as Israel Friedlaender and Horace Kallen had anticipated him. Instead, it was his formulation of American Zionism—his emphases, allusions, nuances and, above all, his memorable epigrams—that sounded so fresh and creative. This,

along with the magic already associated with the Brandeis name, proved tremendously influential in spreading Zionism's gospel. As a result, some of the aura that already surrounded Brandeis in American circles now came to envelop Zionism as well.

Before Brandeis, Zionism had faced substantial opposition from those who claimed that it was un-American. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, for example, had declared in 1898 that "We are unalterably opposed to political Zionism...America is our Zion...The mission of Israel is spiritual, not political." Its members and others feared that Zionism would raise embarrassing questions of dual loyalty and undermine the gains that American Jewry had achieved through the 19th century.

Brandeis did much to allay these fears. The fact that a person of his stature and prestige stamped Zionism with his seal of approval gave it instant legitimacy. His activities also set off something of a chain reaction, bringing to Zionism a coterie of distinguished American Jews—including Julian Mack, Nathan Straus, Mary Fels, Louis Kirstein, Felix Frankfurter, Bernard Flexner, Robert Szold and the brothers Walter and Eugene Meyer—many of whom numbered themselves among Brandeis's friends and came to Zionism at his personal urging.

Non-Jews too became interested in Zionism thanks to Brandeis, most notably his friend Norman Hapgood, the editor of *Harper's Weekly*, and so for the first time, the movement gained access to major journals of opinion. One veteran Zionist leader recalls that, thanks to Brandeis, "Zionism became 'fashionable' almost overnight."

While the dual loyalty issue did not disappear quite so quickly, it certainly lost much of its credibility—the more so once Brandeis, as a Zionist, became America's first Jewish Supreme Court justice. Brandeis interpreted his nomination to the Court as a vindication of his stance; he cited it as evidence that "in the opinion of the President there is no conflict between Zionism and loyalty to America."

The key to Zionism's legitimacy, as Brandeis understood it, lay in its link to Americanism. This echoed a favorite theme of turn-of-the-century American Jews, who delighted in uncovering Jewish aspects of the nation's past, the so-called "Hebrew mortar" that provided the cement for the foundations of American democracy.

For most Jews, however, these links had up to then justified a sense of America *as* Zion. Brandeis employed them instead to win support, by Americans, *for* Zion. He thus described Zionism in language redolent of Thanksgiving Day orations, peppering his speeches with references to the "Jewish pilgrim fathers" and to standard progressive goals. He also identified Zionism with America's own highest ideals: "By battling for the Zionist cause," he told delegates to the 1915 Zionist Convention, "the American ideal of democracy, of social justice and of liberty will be given wider expression."

On one occasion, Brandeis candidly admitted that Zionism represented for him a natural extension of his Americanism, which, in the spirit of the times, he traced back to the Hebrews of old. "I began gradually to realize," he explained, "that these 20th-century ideals of America, of democracy, of social justice, of longing for righteousness, were ancient Jewish ideals...that that which I was striving for as a thing essentially American, as the ideals for our country, were the Jewish ideals of thousands of years."

Ein Ha Shofet, meaning Spring of the Judge, was founded by the American Jewish community and named for Louis Brandeis. He supported the pioneering community and

followed its development with admiration. Shown here are the tents that went up for temporary shelter for the first settlers and the barricaded houses that followed



The Zion that Brandeis so proudly championed and actually saw in his mind's eye was very much an idealized Zion, a utopia, a projection of America as he wished it to be, without the "curse of bigness" and the other evils that he thought America had fallen prey to. In his words, it was "a country in which all is possible which we had pictured to ourselves as desirable." Earlier, he had set forth what was desirable—for America—in a memorable Independence Day address (1915) where he identified life, liberty and happiness with education, industrial liberty and financial independence, and then spoke out boldly on behalf of "equal opportunity" for all. Zion was simply an extension of this vision.

This same equation of Judaism with Americanism—an equation, ironically, that anti-Zionists like Rabbi David Philipson of Cincinnati might heartily have seconded—appears, albeit somewhat more enigmatically, in Brandeis's most famous and oft-quoted Zionist pronouncement: "To be good Americans we must be better Jews, and to be better Jews, we must become Zionists."

Critics have pointed out that this much vaunted relationship between Americanism, Judaism and Zionism is actually something of a *non sequitur*, and that the power of Brandeis's pronouncement lies largely in the fact that Brandeis

himself said it. It has also been observed by Jerold S. Auerbach in his recent book, *Rabbis and Lawyers*, that Brandeis's Zionism was much more American than Jewish, drawing less from the Bible and rabbinic sources than from progressive idealism. Given Zionism's need to attract supporters, however, these ideological weaknesses turn out to have been brilliant marketing stratagems. By associating Zionism with the glories of Americanism, Brandeis effectively pulled the rug out from under the movement's opponents and placed them on the defensive. Suddenly, the tables were turned. Zionists, quoting Brandeis, could hold their heads high, while opponents squirmed uncomfortably, not certain quite how to respond.

The 1918 Pittsburgh Program of the Zionist Organization of America, a statement of Zionist principles that Horace Kallen drafted and Brandeis refined, embodies many of these ideals. More of a sacred agenda than an ideological platform, it called for "political and civil equality" in Palestine; "irrespective of race, sex or faith"; public ownership of land, natural resources and public utilities; the application of "the cooperative principle," where feasible, to "all agricultural, industrial, commercial and financial undertakings"; free public education embracing all grades and subjects; instruction in Hebrew, "the national language of the Jewish people"; and in at least one draft, protection "from the evils of land speculation and from every other



form of financial oppression." Elsewhere, Brandeis associated the Jewish homeland with related virtues: democracy, social justice, agrarianism, smallness. He boasted, in early speeches, that "in the Jewish colonies of Palestine there are no Jewish criminals." Later, during the Depression, he identified Palestine as the "only land in which there is no unemployment." Still later, according to his friend and former law clerk, Professor Paul Freund, he exclaimed with obvious emotion, "Palestine is the one place in the world today where the people are truly happy."

Thus conceived, the Jewish homeland represented American liberal intellectuals' fondest and most romantic visions of a better world, a world influenced by the postwar dreams of Woodrow Wilson and made only more attractive, in Brandeis's case, by his first (and only) visit to the Holy Land in 1919. "It is a wonderful country, a wonderful city," he raved to his wife from Jerusalem, "It is a miniature California, but a California endowed with all the interest which the history of man can contribute and the deepest emotions which can stir a people. The ages-long longing, the love is all explicable now. It has also the great advantage over California of being small."

Horace Kallen, a significant influence on Brandeis in these years, understood that this was all utopianism, a term, significantly, that derives from two Greek words meaning "good place" and "no place." The blueprint that he and Brandeis drew up for Zion

responded not to the realities of the Middle East, but to the decline of Jeffersonian liberalism and to the problems of an economically changing America. What the Pittsburgh Program sought to bring about in Zion was, *mutatis mutandis*, what its authors also hoped in time to bring about in America. The Zion of their imagination reflected the America of their dreams. Kallen soon lost hope; Brandeis never did.

Thanks in part to his enduring faith, Brandeis came to function as something of a high priest in Zionist circles. Activists made what they called "pilgrimages" to his doorstep, seeking inspiration, advice and sometimes money. The magic associated with the great man's name also won Zionism continuing legitimacy: if Zionism was good enough for Brandeis, the argument went, it should be good enough for every American Jew. In addition, Brandeis's name was invoked whenever the question of dual loyalty arose, for he was recognized as the ultimate authority proving that Zionism and Americanism were thoroughly compatible.

Indeed, next to Theodor Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, Brandeis became the most revered figure in the whole American Zionist pantheon. This is no small irony, considering how remote he was from Jewish tradition, yet it is also fitting for Zionism functioned, in

his life and in the lives of many of his Zionist followers, as a form of religion. It was, to be sure, a Jewish nationalist faith—we might today call it a form of civil Judaism—but a faith it was, complete with transcendent goals, sacred symbols, venerated texts, holy days, pilgrimages, doctrinal debate and, of course, prophets and priests. God played almost no role in this faith, but Brandeis was His prophet, and the awe in which *he* was held in Zionist circles was a manifestly religious awe; indeed, he was honored in much the same way that an esteemed rabbi or a Hassidic rebbe might have been honored in equivalent Orthodox circles.

Brandeis in his day filled a spiritual void in the lives of those who honored him. Young Jewish idealists felt particularly drawn to his majestic aura for they saw in him, as one put it, "a leader of gigantic spiritual proportions and genuine moral qualities...a prototype of the unblemished character and an exemplar of the prophetic tradition." Half-a-century later, we may reasonably wonder whether Brandeis was quite as perfect as his followers professed him to be, and we may smile indulgently at some of the more extravagant tributes paid to his memory. But professional skepticism, in this case, mingles with feelings of regret, even yearning. For would that such an Isaiah stood among us today. ■

Justice (center with white cap) and Mrs. Brandeis hosting American Zionists at his summer home in Chatham

