

Response

The Question of Shlilat Ha-Galut in American Zionism

Prof. Gorny provides in his paper a valuable survey of the concept of *shlilat ha-golah* (negation of the Diaspora) and its place in Zionist history and thought. He is an acknowledged expert in this area, and his thoughts on the relationship between Zionism and the Diaspora—past, present, and future—merit careful consideration.

In what follows, I want to focus more narrowly on the place of *shlilat ha-golah* in American Zionism—or more precisely, its lack of a place. Where negation of the Diaspora played a central role in European Zionist thought, American Zionists tended to dismiss it out of hand. Israel Friedlaender, for example, specifically disassociated himself from “those who champion ‘the denial of the Golan.’” Instead, he believed that “given the unifying and inspiring influence of a Jewish center in our ancient homeland, Jewish life in the Diaspora may be so shaped as to harmonize both with the age-long traditions of our people and with the life of the nations in whose midst we dwell.” His famous formula was “Zionism plus Diaspora, Palestine plus America.” Negaters of the Diaspora, he charged, sought “to sacrifice the bulk of the Jewish people outside of Palestine for the sake of a small minority who are to form the Jewish nucleus in Palestine.”¹

Louis Brandeis was even less interested in negating the Diaspora. His Zionism demanded “loyalty to America” and was actually an extension of his Americanism. “The ideals which I . . . set forth for America,” he once wrote, “should prevail likewise in the Jewish State.”² He famously argued that “every American Jew who aids in advancing the Jewish settlement in Palestine, *though he feels that neither he nor his descendants will ever live there*, will likewise be a better man and a better American for doing so.”³ [italics added]

Judah Magnes, heir to American Zionist thinking, maintained his opposition to *shlilat ha-golah* even after he himself made aliyah. In Jerusalem, in 1923, he spoke of “the spiritual significance of the Galut.”

“My conception of Zionism,” he reminded his largely unsympathetic audience, does “not at all provide for the Jews being taken out of their place in the struggling world.”⁴ Earlier he had written to Chaim Weizmann that “the despair theory of Zionism does not appeal to me.”⁵

In short, the concept of *shlilat ha-golah* did not historically play an important role in American Zionist thinking. The reasons for this are complex, but they largely stem from the distinctive historical experience of American Jews. As Ben Halpern once explained, “Emancipation was never an issue” in the United States. “Because of this, the continuity of European Jewish ideologies is broken in America.”⁶ Negation of the Diaspora may have made sense to European Jews whose hopes for “normalization” had been dashed by brutal antisemitism. The situation in America, however, was different.

American exceptionalism, however, is only part of the explanation. To properly understand American Jewry’s unique understanding of Zionism and of its larger role within the Jewish world requires us to appreciate that America, for many Jews, represented nothing less than an alternative to Zion. Even if Jews could not achieve full equality in the degenerate Old World, these Jews believed, their great goal might still be achieved in the blessed New World. Like so many of their Christian neighbors, they considered America to be an “almost promised land”—if not quite the equivalent of Zion, then surely the closest thing to it.

As early as the seventeenth century, the logic of mercantilism demanded that Jews in the New World be given freedoms undreamed of in the Old. “Treat and cause to be treated the Jewish nation on a basis of equality with all other residents and subjects in all treaties, negotiations and actions in and out of war without discrimination,” the States General of the United Netherlands ordered, seeking to encourage Jewish settlement and trade in mid-seventeenth-century Recife Brazil.⁷ Subsequently, liberty, democracy, church–state separation, *de facto* pluralism, abundant opportunity, and the fact that North America housed a variety of other out-groups, notably Blacks and Catholics, shaped a society that made it possible for Jews to obtain what they so rarely did in Europe: the chance to be treated as equals, to thrive economically, and at the same time to remain Jewish.

This, of course, constituted the dream of the *goldene medine* (“Golden Land”), and it represented an immensely powerful historical challenge. European Jews who looked upon emancipation as a failure, considered antisemitism inevitable, and saw no solution to the “Jewish Problem”

except Zionism had regularly to contend with this daunting challenge. America offered an alternative refuge to persecuted Jews around the world. From the late nineteenth century onward (except when immigration to America was restricted), Jews seeking a land where they might live freely and prosper had two major options to choose from. Evidence that America was seen as an alternative “promised land” is easy to find. In 1912, a bestselling memoir by a Jewish immigrant to Boston named Mary Antin was actually entitled *The Promised Land*. “Next year—in America,” she recalled hearing at the end of the Passover *seder* in her home town of Polotzk in 1891. “There was our promised land,” she reported, “and many faces were turned towards the West.”⁸ An oft-reprinted greeting card from the same period uses a similar “promised land” image to depict East European Jewish immigrants arriving in America. “Open to me the gates of righteousness,” the card declares in Hebrew, evoking the Psalmist (118:19). And then, quoting a phrase from Isaiah (26:2) that applies to Jerusalem, it cries “open the gates, and let a righteous nation enter.”⁹ The establishment of the State of Israel had little impact on such imagery. As recently as 1978, a history of American Jewry evoked in its title God’s biblical command to Abraham to go forth to “the land that I show you.” Another American Jewish history textbook, written by a leading scholar who is also a prominent Labor Zionist, bears the title *Zion in America*.¹⁰

The very idea that America could provide a “Zion” to persecuted Jews calls into question some of classical Zionism’s central assumptions. Where Zionism argued that emancipation ideals could not be realized anywhere and that the Diaspora had thus to be “negated,” the “golden land” of America seemed to prove just the opposite. It offered an alternative vision and an alternative solution to the problems faced by Jews throughout their history. To be sure, immigration restriction laws would often prevent persecuted Jews from finding refuge in the United States—a fact that helps explain both the growth of American Zionism and its embrace by such staunch American patriots as Louis Brandeis and (for a time) Mary Antin. But neither they nor most other American Zionists supported the “negation of the Diaspora.” Instead, their Zion was very much an extension of the “American Zion.” The Zion that they championed in Palestine was a projection of their fondest American ideals and values.

Whether this dream of “American Zion” was ever realistic is not the issue here. What is important for our purposes is that the dream enjoyed wide currency, and as such has played an enormously significant

role in modern Jewish history. It undergirded the “On to America” movement that brought liberal-minded Central European Jews to America in 1848. It influenced masses of East European Jews to choose America over Palestine beginning in 1881. And it explains why hundreds of thousands of Jews (including many Israelis) have continued to immigrate to America since Israel’s establishment in 1948. Indeed, a good case could be made that the dream of the “Golden Land” in America has been no less potent a factor in modern Jewish history than the dream of returning to the Promised Land in Israel. Even today, many of the tensions between American Jews and Israel—particularly those concerning “who is a Jew,” religious pluralism, and free immigration—reflect the different assumptions harbored by proponents of these utterly different solutions to the problems that world Jewry faces.

In the final analysis, neither Israel nor the United States has proved to be utopia for Jews. Reality in both communities has turned out to be a good deal more sobering than starry-eyed advocates of “promised lands” expected. Prof. Gorny, recognizing this, proposes the establishment of a new Hibbat Zion (Lover of Zion) movement aimed at promoting Jewish continuity and revitalization among *all* sectors of Jewry both in Israel and in the Diaspora. This is surely a noble dream. My own suggestion, perhaps less Jerusalem-centered than his, is that we not only abandon *shlilat ha-golah*, but that we actually embrace, nurture, and encourage a spirit of friendly competition among the great contemporary centers of world Jewry so that each seeks to create a society where Jews and Judaism might flourish. Such competition, as we have seen, has long existed somewhat furtively, without official recognition or legitimation, between the Jewish communities of Israel and the United States. Now it is time to champion and expand such competition to include other communities, and to recognize it as a positive good, attendant with all of the benefits that general international and trade competition carry with them.

Shlilat ha-golah, in economic terms, is akin to a high protectionist tariff that rewards backwardness and waste. Even if once necessary for the development of the State of Israel, its time has long since passed. Competition among Jewish communities seeking to become the best place on earth for Jews to live, by contrast, promises to inspire Jews everywhere—in Israel, the United States, and smaller centers too—to exert their best efforts into making their community a model one.

Notes

1. Israel Friedlaender, *Past and Present: A Collection of Jewish Essays* (Cincinnati: Ark Publishing, 1919), pp. x-xi.
2. Jonathan D. Sarna, "'The Greatest Jew in the World Since Jesus Christ': The Jewish Legacy of Louis D. Brandeis," *American Jewish History* 81: 3-4 (Spring-Summer 1994), pp. 359-60.
3. Louis D. Brandeis, *The Jewish Problem: How To Solve It* (Cleveland: Joseph Saslaw, 1939), p. 22 [italics added].
4. Arthur A. Goren, *Dissenter in Zion: From the Writings of Judah L. Magnes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1982), p. 208.
5. Evyatar Friesel, "Magnes: Zionism in Jerusalem," in William M. Brinner and Moses Rischin, eds., *Like All the Nations? The Life and Legacy of Judah L. Magnes* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), p. 74.
6. Ben Halpern, *The American Jew: A Zionist Analysis* (New York: Schocken, 1983), p. 13.
7. *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 33 (1934): 105.
8. Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969 [orig. ed. 1912]), p. 141.
9. The image is depicted, among other places, on the cover of Jonathan D. Sarna, *The American Jewish Experience* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986).
10. Stanley Feldstein, *The Land That I Showed You: Three Centuries of Jewish Life in America* (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978); Henry L. Feingold, *Zion in America: The Jewish Experience from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1974).