

JONATHAN D. SARNA

Converts to Zionism in the American Reform Movement

In 1869, Rabbi Bernhard Felsenthal of Chicago protested efforts aimed at Jewish colonization of Palestine and supported the resolution of the Philadelphia Conference of Reform Rabbis declaring that "the Messianic goal of Israel is not the restoration of the old Jewish state under a descendant of David, involving a second separation from the nations of the earth, but the union of all men as the children of God."¹ In 1907, the same Rabbi Felsenthal, now a committed Zionist, declared it his conviction that "Zionism alone will be the savior of our Nation and its religion, and save it from death and disappearance."²

In 1893, Rabbi Gustav Gottheil of Temple Emanu-El of New York told delegates assembled at the World Parliament of Religion that Palestine "is no longer our country . . . that title appertains to the land of our birth or adoption; and 'our nation' is that nation of which we form a part, and with the destinies of which we are identified, to the exclusion of all others." Just four years later, Gottheil changed his mind and became vice-president of the Federation of American Zionists as well as a staunch supporter of Theodor Herzl.³

In 1899, Rabbi Max Heller of New Orleans preached in opposition to Zionism, characterizing the movement as "a product of despair." He argued that the Jew had a lesson to teach in the diaspora, and declared the very idea of a Jewish state to be totally impractical. Two years later he had begun to rethink his position, and by 1903 he proudly labeled himself "a convinced Zionist." He was now persuaded that anti-Zionists, in his words, "misunderstand Jewish history, misinterpret Judaism and do injustice to the cultural functions of nationalism."⁴

All three of these leading Reform rabbis—Felsenthal, Gottheil, and Heller—were known in their day as "converts to Zionism." They were not alone. The *Maccabaeon*, in March 1907, devoted a whole editorial to what it called "Reform converts" and rejoiced that "the Zionistic infection of the Hebrew Union College seems to be spreading" and that more than a score of Reform rabbis had become "workers in the Zionist movement."⁵ Yet, this phenomenon of Reform converts to American Zionism has until now received little scholarly attention. For all that has been written on Reform Judaism and Zionism,⁶ we know almost nothing about what motivated these

Zionism in the American Reform Movement || 189

converts, why they converted when they did, and what impact they subsequently made. In this essay I shall focus on these questions, emphasizing converts to Zionism among Reform rabbis, although I shall draw in a few cases from the testimonies of lay converts as well. I stress the years prior to 1920, for that is the period when Reform Judaism and Zionism seemed least compatible, and conversions entailed the greatest social risk. Besides seeking to explain these individual conversions, I shall argue that they reflect a development of great importance in the history of American Judaism: an awakening that transformed American Jewish life and produced a new synthesis that permitted Reform Judaism and Zionism to co-exist.

Any discussion of American Reform Judaism and Zionism properly begins with the Reform movement's well-known institutional opposition (prior to the Columbus Platform of 1937) both to the very idea that Jews are a nation and to the corollary that they should return to their ancestral home. At the 1869 Philadelphia Rabbinical Conference, the 1885 Pittsburgh Rabbinical Conference, the 1897 meeting of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the 1898 meeting of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), and on countless other occasions, resolutions against restoration and Zionism won broad approval. The UAHC Resolution, signed by David Philipson, Simon Wolf, and Joseph Krauskopf and adopted unanimously, summarized with particular acuity the major arguments that opponents of Zionism advanced:

We are opposed to political Zionism. The Jews are not a nation but a religious community. Zion has a precious possession of the past, the early home of our faith, where our prophets uttered their world-subduing thoughts, and our psalmists sang their world-enchanting hymns. As such it is a holy memory, but it is not our hope of the future. America is our Zion. Here, in the home of religious liberty, we have aided in founding this new Zion, the fruition of the beginning laid in the old. The mission of Judaism is spiritual, not political. Its aim is not to establish a state, but to spread the truths of religion and humanity throughout the world.⁷

Despite this and other resolutions, however, it is clear that the leaders of Reform Judaism remained divided over the Zionism issue. A careful student of the debates published through the years in the *Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook* reminds us, as Arthur J. Lelyveld has concluded, that "the CCAR was never a monolith—never totally anti-Zionist, never totally Zionist. . . . Generalizations or stereotypes as to what constitutes a Zionist or an anti-Zionist point of view are invariably inadequate when one considers the full body of utterances of any individual Conference leader."⁸ Similar divisions were evident among the students at the Hebrew Union College and among the faculty as well.⁹ What is nevertheless significant is that these disagreements, fundamental as they were, did not lead to a schism within the Reform movement. To the contrary, as Michael Meyer has shown in a seminal article, the basis for ideological rapprochement between Zionism and Reform Judaism took shape during the very period when "to the

190 || JONATHAN D. SARNA

majority on both sides the two movements seemed to be mortal enemies."¹⁰

Against this background, we may begin to examine somewhat more closely the whole phenomenon of Reform Jewish conversions to the Zionist cause. The term "conversion," understood in its broadest sense, refers to a "dynamic, multifaceted process of change." William James defined the term psychologically as "a process, gradual or sudden, by which a self, hitherto divided and consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior, and happy in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities." More recently, Richard Travisano, seeking to distinguish conversions from other kinds of transformations, has described the process as "a radical reorganization of identity, meaning life."¹¹ The word "conversion" is most frequently employed within a religious context, which makes its use here in connection with Zionism of some interest. The fact that classical religious terminology was used to describe someone who embraced Zionism reminds us that the movement displayed many characteristic features of a religion, including sacred persons, events, beliefs, rituals, and symbols.¹² Stephen Wise once actually stated that "Zionism is my religion."¹³ Conversion to Zionism, then, meant much more than simply an ideological commitment to the movement's mission; it also involved some degree of participation in its broader cult.

Obviously, not all Reform Zionists underwent conversion. "There are those," Alice Seligsberg recognized back in 1917, "to whom Zionism has always been in harmony with their religious traditions, who, therefore, required no argument to convince them of its truth."¹⁴ Reform Jews of this kind had been Zionists (or proto-Zionists) all along, in some cases even before they were Reform Jews. Stephen Wise, for one, imbibed love of Zion from his parents and grandparents. His grandmother settled in Jerusalem and died there, his father was "an ardent Zionist from the pre-Herzlian days," and Stephen Wise himself, as a child, collected funds for Palestine. By the time of the First Zionist Congress in 1897, Wise already identified as a Zionist; meeting Theodor Herzl simply intensified a preexisting emotional tie and commitment.¹⁵ Another early Reform Zionist, Rabbi Max Raisin, identified with Zionism as a young teenager on the Lower East Side of New York and even corresponded with Ahad Haam. He entered Hebrew Union College already committed to the movement and may have influenced some of his fellow students.¹⁶ As time went on, there would be an increasing number of Hebrew Union College students who, like Raisin, entered rabbinical school after having grown up in the Zionist movement. For them, the question was not whether to convert to Zionism but whether to maintain their affiliation in the face of anti-Zionist pressure.¹⁷

A number of rabbis and about-to-be rabbis did, however, convert to Zionism, and the question remains why. Those who study conversion professionally suggest that one should search, in all cases, for an antecedent crisis:

Zionism in the American Reform Movement || 191

Virtually all students of conversion agree that some kind of crisis precedes conversion. The crisis may be religious, political, psychological, or cultural, or it may be a life situation that opens people to new options. During the crisis, myths, rituals, symbols, goals, and standards cease to function well for the individual or culture, thus creating great disturbance in the individual's life. According to social scientists, who often work on the assumptions of psychopathology, a conversion in this situation can be seen as a coping mechanism.¹⁸

In attempting to ferret out these crises, I began by searching for personal psychological factors: underlying reasons that might explain why a disproportionate number of conversions to Zionism seem to have taken place at critical turning points in the life cycle, either at the onset of a career—for example, while studying at the Hebrew Union College—or just after retirement. Judah Magnes, for example, published his first pro-Zionist statement (“Palestine—or Death”) during his second year at Hebrew Union College, in 1896. By 1901, when he was studying in Berlin, he considered himself “a warm Zionist”; his conversion was complete.¹⁹ Another student, Harvey E. Wessel, published an article in his senior year (1920) entitled “How I Became a Zionist at the Hebrew Union College.” According to Wessel's account, his interest was sparked in his very first year at the college by his study of Jewish liturgy. Thereafter his Zionism was nurtured both by what he learned about Jews as a distinct people and by the “new signs of life” he saw emerging within the Jewish world.²⁰ Zionism seems to have provided him, as it did Magnes, with a sense of larger meaning, a vision inspiring enough to help him overcome the crisis of self-doubt that so often accompanies rabbinic training. Wessel was not alone in his commitment to Zionism: there were no fewer than seven professing Zionists in his graduating class of ten, as well as “two sympathizers and one anti.”²¹

Rabbi Joseph Silverman, by contrast, converted to Zionism at the other end of the adult life cycle, in retirement. Just a year after Wessel's conversion, he “surprised almost 1300 guests at a dinner at the Hotel Astor . . . by declaring himself in favor of upbuilding of Palestine and the establishment there of a republic patterned after the democracy of the United States.” Silverman, rabbi emeritus of Temple Emanu-El, had long been known as an anti-Zionist. He helped word the anti-Zionist resolution of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1897, delivered a controversial sermon in 1902 in which he lambasted Zionism as unpatriotic and “based on a feigned, fictitious and imaginary love of Zion,” and later went so far as to accuse Zionists of financial improprieties and of being land speculators “who seek their own ends.” But now, in his retirement, he changed his mind and became “an active propagandist” for Zionism. In 1924 he toured Palestine for the Zionist movement and promised to dedicate the rest of his life “to the great work that lies before us.” Privately, according to his former classmate, Joseph Stolz, he confessed that “it afforded him an ineffable joy and satisfaction in his old age to work with

192 || JONATHAN D. SARNA

almost youthful enthusiasm for the re-establishment of the Jewish National Home in Palestine."²²

Other rabbis who converted to Zionism in retirement include Gustav Gottheil, Bernhard Felsenthal, and Samuel Sale. Joseph Krauskopf, although not officially retired, also became a Zionist at the end of his career.²³ In all these cases we can, unfortunately, only speculate as to the personal and psychological factors involved. But the reference to "youthful enthusiasm" in the case of Silverman—or a parallel reference to "youthful ardor" in the case of Felsenthal²⁴—suggests some effort to, in the words of the psychologist Daniel Devinson, "sustain . . . youthfulness in a new form appropriate to late adulthood."²⁵ Through Zionism these rabbis seem to have recaptured some of that powerful sense of mission that had so inspired them in former days.

Suggestive as these case studies may be, I am now persuaded that it would be a mistake to understand conversions to Zionism in purely personal or psychological terms. Such explanations, even if partially true, are much too limited and reductionist to be wholly satisfying, and they break down when applied to Reform converts as a group. Moreover, like so many psychological explanations, they tempt us, as Charles Hoyd Cohen has suggested, "to esteem the latent content of human production over the manifest and to slight the reasons people advance for their [own] behavior."²⁶ It is more illuminating, I think, to view conversions in broader cultural terms. Seen from this perspective, Reform conversions to Zionism become part of a larger phenomenon that contemporaries described as nothing less than an American Jewish awakening; we might call it, using the language of anthropology, a period of Jewish cultural revitalization. It began late in the nineteenth century in a general crisis of beliefs and values and extended over several decades, during which a profound reorientation in American Jewish beliefs and values took place. Reform Jewish conversions were symptomatic of this crisis and help us to understand what people thought to be wrong. Zionism responded to this crisis and played an integral role in bringing about the reorientation that transformed not only Reform Judaism but all of American Judaism.²⁷

The roots of American Jewry's cultural crisis go back to the late 1870s. Antisemitism explains part of what happened. The rise of racially based Jew-hatred in Germany, a land that many young American Jews (and their parents) had previously revered for its liberal spirit and cultural advancement, challenged a host of Jewish assumptions about emancipation, universalism, and future religious rapprochement.

The growth of social discrimination against American Jews had an equally significant impact. While such discrimination was not new, Jews had not expected that discrimination would grow. The fact that it did grow and, with the development of racial thought, even became respectable in some circles again challenged Jewish liberal assumptions. Where in the

Zionism in the American Reform Movement II 193

1860s and early 1870s many Jews had confidently looked forward to a coming "new era" of interfaith harmony and religious equality, now these assumptions were shaken.²⁸

Developments within American Protestantism added yet another dimension to the mood of uneasiness that one senses in the American Jewish community of this period. The spiritual crisis and internal divisions that plagued Protestant America as it faced the staggering implications of Darwinism and biblical criticism drove evangelicals and liberals alike to renew their particularistic calls for a "Christian America." Visions of a liberal religious alliance and of close cooperation with Jews and Unitarians gradually evaporated. Although interfaith exchanges continued, Jews came to realize that many of their Christian friends continued to harbor hopes that one day Jews would "see the light." Much to the embarrassment of Jewish leaders, some Christian liberals looked to Felix Adler's de-Judaized Ethical Culture movement as a harbinger of Judaism's future course.²⁹

On the Jewish side, this period witnessed a comparable crisis of the spirit. Alarmed at religious "indifference," Jewish ignorance, and "Adlerism's success," many began to question old assumptions regarding the direction of American Judaism. A movement of young Jews back toward tradition was evident as early as 1879. By 1884, according to Rabbi David Stern, the religious agenda of the day was "entirely different" from what it had been before. "Then the struggle was to remove the dross; to-day it is to conserve the pearl beneath."³⁰

Massive Eastern European Jewish immigration, coming on the heels of all of these developments, added a great deal of fuel to this crisis of confidence. The problem was not simply one of numbers nor was it confined to the fact that in Russia, as in Germany, liberalism had been tested and found wanting. Instead American Jews began to realize that their vision of the future was built on false premises. The optimistic prophecies of the 1860s and 1870s had failed, the hoped-for "new era" had not materialized, and conditions for Jews in America and around the world had grown worse instead of better. This situation posed a cultural crisis of the highest order and precipitated the many and varied changes, particularly Zionism, that took place in succeeding decades.

Admittedly, no Reform converts to Zionism mentioned all of these factors in explaining why they had abandoned earlier beliefs and joined the Zionist movement. But key components of this crisis turn up over and over again in their testimonies. As early as 1875, Bernhard Felsenthal warned that "the very existence of Israel is greatly endangered in America." He worried that "hundreds of individuals and of families are getting estranged, and are gradually melting away from Judaism. . . . A great part of the rising generation is growing up in total ignorance of the religion of their fathers." "In a time not very distant," he darkly predicted, "very many of our descendants will not know whether they are Jews or not."³¹ These concerns led

194 || JONATHAN D. SARNA

Felsenthal to reevaluate his views on Jewish peoplehood and ultimately propelled him toward support for the Zionist cause.

The pogroms of the 1880s and 1890s led to a period of soul searching on the part of a larger number of Reform Jews. By the late 1890s, several—including up to a dozen students at Hebrew Union College³²—had come to see Zionism as the only practical solution to ongoing persecutions. They looked to Zion as a potential refuge for Jews seeking to flee.³³ Again, Bernhard Felsenthal's writings expressed this argument with particular force and candor:

I feel deeply with the sufferings of the larger majority of my Jewish brethren, with the Jews in Russia, Roumania, Persia, Arabia, Morocco and elsewhere, and it is my decided conviction that the best method and the most rational way to help them would consist in aiding them to emigrate from their country in which they happen to live and to settle in Palestine and to colonize there and in the adjacent countries of Syria, etc. In America they are not wanted. . . . Neither are the doors wide open for them in Austria, Germany, France, England, or elsewhere in Europe. Where then can the unfortunate people, of whom we speak here, find a quiet and undisturbed home?³⁴

The Kishinev pogrom in 1903 intensified these concerns and drew new converts to Zionism. Rabbi Adolph Radin, for example, announced that he had converted, "after much thinking and doubting and listening to arguments pro and con." The "massacre of our brethren in Kishineff [*sic*]," he explained, along with Russian reactions to it "have cured me, radically and totally, from the sweet hope that our modern civilization, based upon egoism and selfishness, will put a stop to Anti-Semitism and its brutalities." Radin found that he no longer believed in universalism and the "Jewish mission" as expounded in the ideology of classical Reform Judaism. "Our mission," he wrote bitterly, "is not to be pillaged and robbed and slaughtered and butchered by drunken beasts."³⁵ According to a no doubt exaggerated account in the *Maccabean*, "thousands" of others had come to similar conclusions: "Men to whom all has been darkness," it wrote, "have, through an electric spark, beheld the light. What else but Zionism? What other solution is possible?"³⁶

Continuing domestic antisemitism also played a significant role in fomenting the crisis that turned Reform Jews toward Zionism. This influence is, however, harder to document. American Jews were most reluctant to discuss antisemitism in their own country and certainly did not want Zionism to be associated in the popular mind with any lack of faith in American ideals.³⁷ When, on one occasion, the issue was raised publicly, "the Zionist movement," according to Louis Lipsky, "was reproached with being meddlesome, impertinent and a source of danger to the Jewish people."³⁸ Still, one can find occasional intimations of this theme, particularly at the turn of the century. The most remarkable one I know by a Reform Jew was made

one line short

Zionism in the American Reform Movement || 195

by Richard Gottheil in his celebrated 1897 defense of Zionism delivered at a private meeting of the Judaeans, the cultural society of New York's Jewish elite:

I hesitate to speak of our own country; but I feel that we are amongst ourselves and that I can speak with freedom and with full liberty. Where do *we* stand to-day? Are *we* on the road to the much-vaunted assimilation? I am free to say that we are much further from that goal than we were when I came here 25 years ago. Gradually, but surely, we are being forced back into a physical and moral ghetto. Private schools are being closed against our children one by one; we are practically boycotted from all summer hotels—and our social lines run as far apart from those of our neighbors as they did in the worst days of our European degradation. . . . It is here that modern Zionism steps in. It recognizes the fact, which is so plain yet we refuse to see it, that the attempt at assimilation has been unsuccessful; and that there is absolutely no prospect of similar attempts being more successful in the future. For the world asks too much from us; it demands that we assimilate in reality and completely, and that we do not stop half-way.³⁹

Writing a year later in the student paper of the Hebrew Union College, William H. Fineshriber advocated Zionism on similar grounds. "We are strangers in a strange land," he wrote. "Like the negro, the Jew is an alien, with a difference only of degree."⁴⁰ The "growing prejudice of Western nations" was likewise one of the factors that, in 1901, led Max Heller to convert to Zionism, after he had initially come out against it.⁴¹

Yet the key to understanding Reform conversions is neither antisemitism nor the persecution of Eastern European Jewry but rather, as I have suggested, the larger cultural crisis to which both contributed. Events at the turn of the century had outpaced ideology, and, as we have seen, many of the basic assumptions upon which nineteenth-century American Reform Judaism rested had proved false. Zionism, as Max Heller understood sooner than almost anybody else, was a means of revitalizing Reform so that it could meet the crisis of the day:

The Zionist is needed in Reform ranks to protest. . . . He must refuse to join in the noisy acclaim which hails our age and our country as, respectively, the millenium [*sic*] and the paradise of Judaism; he sees religious desolation where the idolater of occidentalism brags of his monumental temples; he observes steady, unhindered growth of prejudice and intolerance, where the worshipper of "up-to-date" is exulting over empty phrases and ineffective resolutions; and, above all else, he preserves a warm fellow-feeling for those bonds of Jewishness . . . which make the Jew kin the world over.⁴²

The choice as Heller and other early twentieth-century American Zionists perceived it was between Zionism and the end—the end not just of Reform Judaism but of the Jewish people itself. Zionism alone, they felt, held the capacity to revitalize Jewry by reshaping its goals to meet the desperate needs of contemporary Jews. No wonder Bernhard Felsenthal felt that in time "all would become Zionists";⁴³ there was, to his mind, no other viable

196 || JONATHAN D. SARNA

alternative. Henrietta Szold, in a private letter written at about this same time, agreed: "I am more than ever convinced," she wrote, "that if not Zionism, then nothing—then extinction for the Jew."⁴⁴

It comes as no surprise, then, that some Reform converts to Zionism experienced a sense of rebirth, a feeling that through Zionism their lives had at last become meaningful and whole.⁴⁵ Julian Leon Magnes—whose "born again" experience with Zionism was symbolized by the fact that he Hebraized his name to Judah Leib—described in a letter to his parents how Zionism transformed not only his intellectual and spiritual interests but his whole "mode of life." "Since I have become a Zionist," he explained, "my view of life has changed; my view as to my calling has changed; my view as to my future has changed; my hopes, my prayers have changed."⁴⁶ Harvey Wessel, the Reform rabbinical student who converted while at Hebrew Union College, likewise testified "to the change wrought in my ideas by the adoption of the Zionist point of view." He now viewed Judaism "as a continuum" and felt connected to Jews of the past. Where before he had lacked enthusiasm for the pulpit, now, thanks to Zionism, he pronounced himself ready to embark on his career with "zeal and earnestness."⁴⁷

Having been reborn into Zionism, however, Reform converts still faced the vexing question of whether they could legitimately remain Reform Jews. Leading Zionists, after all, doubted that a true Zionist could be a believing Reform Jew, just as leading Reform Jews doubted whether a believing Reform Jew could be a true Zionist.⁴⁸ As a result, some converts slid back. Max Heller observed as early as 1918 that "numbers" of Hebrew Union College students "abandon their Zionist ideals after the rude contact with the world of matter-of-fact people and of ruthless competition."⁴⁹

Those who did remain resolute, however, played an important role in shaping the new synthesis that arose to replace the optimistic, universalistic nineteenth-century American Jewish faith that had now lost credibility in so many circles. While a full description of this new synthesis would take us far afield, two key ideas command attention, for they demonstrate how, in the twentieth century, Reform Zionists (both born Zionists and "born again" Zionists) mediated between Reform Judaism and Zionism, with the results that each movement came to influence the other and both moved toward rapprochement.

We can see this process at work first in the much-discussed "mission motif," the idea that Jews had a mission to serve society at large and a religious and moral message to bring to the world.⁵⁰ For nineteenth century Reform Jews this "mission of Israel" was a prime justification for diaspora Jewish life. It transvalued the diaspora, so that far from being a punishment and curse, it became instead a divine blessing for Jews and for all humankind. Early Zionists found this whole idea ridiculous and absurd. They spoke condescendingly of "mission-Jews" and pointed out, as Michael Meyer observes, "that the average American Jew scarcely acted like a mis-

Zionism in the American Reform Movement || 197

sionary for Jewish ideals."⁵¹ Nevertheless, a great many American Jews, and not just Reform Jews,⁵² continued to find the idea highly attractive. It effectively countered the Christian explanation of why Jews languished in diaspora and nicely dovetailed with America's own grandiose sense of mission, rooted in Puritanism.

The great intellectual achievement of American Reform Zionists, beginning with Bernhard Felsenthal and Richard Gottheil in 1897, was to re-interpret this mission idea so that it not only became thoroughly compatible with Zionism but that Zionism itself became, in effect, a Jewish missionary movement. They taught, in other words, that the mission of Israel could best be carried out by Jews living at the very heart of Jewry, in Eretz Israel, and that Zion, in turn, had a special mission to benefit world Jewry and humanity at large. As Allon Gal has shown, this "mission motif," influenced by the cultural Zionism of Ahad Haam and later elaborated upon in different ways by Stephen Wise, Israel Friedlaender, Louis Brandeis, Henrietta Szold, and others, became central to American Zionist ideology.⁵³

A second area in which Reform Zionists helped to mediate and then to produce a new synthesis concerned the sensitive question of Zionism's relationship to Americanism.⁵⁴ Nineteenth-century American Jews believed that America differed from other lands where Jews resided and that Americanism and Judaism were basically congruent. "This country," Isaac Meyer Wise once wrote, "approaches nearest the Mosaic state among all countries known in history." Taught by Oscar Straus that "the form of government outlined by Moses and practically developed under Joshua and his successors" actually shaped the American republic, Jews concluded that "Judaism is in perfect harmony with the law of the land." Indeed, David Philipson went so far as to claim that "Judaism is so thoroughly in accord with republicanism that it deserves all its adherents to become imbued as soon as possible with free republican ideas."⁵⁵ All of this was anathema to European Zionists, who spoke of *shlilat hagalut* (negation of the diaspora) and considered American Jews to be unduly sanguine. Some American Zionists, including Max Heller, agreed; he characterized the Judaism-equals-Americanism equation as "an immature conceit."⁵⁶ But he was in the minority. More commonly, American Jews characterized their country in the most laudatory of terms. Furthermore, within the context of early twentieth-century American history, with the specter of immigration restriction, widespread concern over the so-called alien menace, and nagging questions about immigrant loyalties, public displays of patriotic piety made good sense. Zionism thus had to be reconciled with Americanism if it was to have any chance of success.

Once again, it was the achievement of Reform Zionists to help bring such a reconciliation about. Using three different arguments, they played a major role in formulating a definition of Zionism that could be defended in staunchly American terms. First, Caspar Levias and Richard Gottheil explained that Zionism was in harmony with well-established American prec-

198 || JONATHAN D. SARNA

edents. They pointed out that many Americans, including the Irish, the Germans, and the Scandinavians, had long maintained ties to "their kinsfolk and co-religionists [who] have a home of their own across the Atlantic," and they implied that Zionism would be no different. Levias went further, suggesting that the whole loyalty question was only raised by frightened rabbis of German background who had been unduly influenced by European conditions. "To us Americans," he smugly declared, "this may remain a subject of little concern. Our population consists of various elements."⁵⁷

A second approach, championed by Bernhard Felsenthal, was to define Zionism as a form of philanthropy, a burden voluntarily assumed by American Jews to help their persecuted brethren overseas. This view again was well within American tradition, as Felsenthal made clear: "There is no conflict," he wrote, "between American patriotism and the endeavors to help poor people and to try to better their bitter lot."⁵⁸

A third and somewhat later approach, which I have not yet found in pre-Brandeis Reform Zionist sources, was essentially to stand the traditional Reform synthesis of America-is-Zion on its head and to argue that Zion was America *redivivus*. Louis Lipsky employed this argument in 1909, pointing to a variety of analogies between Zionism's present and America's past. He compared, for example, the "impulse which animates Zionists" to the "migration of the Pilgrim fathers" and the Zionist ambition to the American Revolution. His conclusion was inevitable: that Zionist ideals were thoroughly "compatible with American tradition, with democratic principles, [and] with present American citizenship."⁵⁹

Subsequently, of course, Louis Brandeis, drawing from all three of these arguments, formulated what became the classic synthesis between Zionism and Americanism in his address entitled "The Jewish Problem: How to Solve It." Here he directly compared the Zionists to the "Pilgrim Fathers" and uttered the lines that would, in his name, be quoted over and over: "Let no American imagine that Zionism is inconsistent with Patriotism. Multiple loyalties are objectionable only if they are inconsistent."⁶⁰

Brandeis delivered his celebrated address on April 25, 1915,⁶¹ before the Eastern Council of the Central Conference of Reform Rabbis. He was himself at that time a fairly recent convert to the Zionist cause and so, apparently, were many of the Reform rabbis in his audience. Another speaker that day, Rabbi Maurice H. Harris, president of the Eastern Council and not an identifying Zionist, commented on this. "Many of the rabbis of the Liberal School," he noted, "have modified their views on Zionism. . . . We cannot be indifferent to a movement that has made so strong an appeal to so large a number of our brethren, many of whom had become estranged from the synagogue."⁶² An informal 1915 survey of the Reform rabbinate by Max Heller confirmed that a significant change had taken place. It found "about as many declared Zionists, among our Reform Rabbis, as outspoken Anti-Zionists," with a much larger number who either "see a great deal of good

Zionism in the American Reform Movement || 199

in Zionism, but shrink from its political aspects," or who "are 'on the fence' being unable to make up their minds."⁶³

Over the next five years the effects of World War I, the Balfour Declaration, immigration restriction, and Henry Ford's antisemitism added new converts to Reform Zionism's ranks. These converts remained in the minority; well into the 1930s the majority of Reform Jews, and certainly their rabbis, preferred to associate themselves with an ambivalent non-Zionism. But whatever their numbers, Reform Zionists had helped to bring about a major ideological revolution. The new religious synthesis that they formulated, yoking together the mission of Israel, cultural Zionism, and Americanism, became, in time, the dominant faith of twentieth-century American Jews.

Notes

1. *The New World of Reform*, ed. Sefton D. Temkin (London, 1971), pp. 38–39. A decade earlier, Bernhard Felsenthal had supported the removal of prayers "for Israel's return to Palestine" from the prayer book of Chicago Sinai Congregation. See Bernard Felsenthal, *The Beginnings of the Chicago Sinai Congregation* (Chicago, 1898), p. 25.

2. *Maccabean* 12 (1907): 202.

3. Richard Gottheil, *The Life of Gustav Gottheil: Memoir of a Priest in Israel* (Williamsport, Pa., 1936), pp. 477–7, see also pp. 190–95, 303.

4. *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, November 18, 1899; "An Utopian Dream or a Practical Solution?" *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, December 12, 1901; "A Nation Awakening," *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, September 27, 1903, all clippings in Max Heller Papers, box 15, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio. Gary P. Zola, "Reform Judaism's Pioneer Zionist: Maximilian Heller," *American Jewish History* 73 (June 1984): 379–80, points out that Heller's criticism was less than fervid, suggesting that he was already on the road to conversion. Heller himself, however, characterized his earlier stance as being in "opposition to the movement." See now Bobbie Malone Rebb. Max Heller (Tusculum, 1997).

5. *Maccabean* 12 (March 1907): 158; see also 30 (May 1917): 223, 257, 267; *American Jewish Chronicle* 3 (September 14, 1917), p. 499, for a report that "several of the most prominent Reform rabbis" had declared themselves "ardent Zionists," including Joseph Krauskopf, Morris Lazon, and Edgar Magnin.

6. Michael A. Meyer, "American Reform Judaism and Zionism: Early Efforts at Ideological Rapprochement," *Studies in Zionism* 7 (Spring 1983): 49–64, is the most important article on the subject. Other studies include David Polish, *Renew Our Days: The Zionist Issue in Reform Judaism* (Jerusalem, 1976); Cyrus Arfa, *Reforming Reform Judaism: Zionism and the Reform Rabbinate, 1885–1948* (Tel-Aviv, 1985); Howard R. Greenstein, *Turning Point: Zionism and Reform Judaism* (Chico, Calif., 1981); Alfred Gottschalk, "Israel and Reform Judaism," *Forum*, no. 36 (Fall/Winter 1979): 143–60; Harold Floyd Caminker, "Reform Judaism in the United States and Its Relationship to Zionism as Reflected Primarily in Sources Heretofore Not Researched, 1889–1948" (rabbinic thesis, Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, 1978); Stuart E. Klee, "From Controversy to Conversion: Liberal Judaism in America and the Zionist Movement, 1917–1941," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 17 (1978): 260–89; Evyatar Friesel, *Hatenuah hazionit be'azot haberit bashanim 1897–1914* (Tel-Aviv, 1970), pp. 90–108; Arthur J. Lelyveld, "The Conference View of the Position of the Jew in the Modern World," in *Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Bertram W. Korn (New York,

200 || JONATHAN D. SARNA

1965), pp. 129–80; Joseph P. Sternstein, "Reform Judaism and Zionism, 1895–1904," *Herzl Year Book* 5 (1963): 11–31; Herschel Levin, "The Other Side of the Coin," *Herzl Year Book* 5 (1963): 33–56; Samuel Halperin, *The Political World of American Zionism* (1961; reprint New York, 1985), pp. 71–101; Naomi W. Cohen, "The Reaction of Reform Judaism in America to Political Zionism (1897–1922)," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 40 (1951): 361–94.

7. *Proceedings of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations* 5 (1893): 4002. David Philipson was "largely responsible" for the resolution's wording. See his *My Life as an American Jew* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1941), p. 137.

8. Lelyveld, "Conference View of the Position of the Jew in the Modern World," pp. 130–31.

9. See, for example, the files of the *HUC Journal*, edited by the rabbinical students. The December 1899 (4, no. 3) special issue devoted to Zionism was well balanced, and a subsequent editorial (February 1900, p. 114) reported that "there are Zionists on the Editorial Board and in the College at large . . . but for the cause of truth, and for the information of future generations of historians who may happen to look through our file and find a Zionistic issue, it must be stated that this band of Zionists is in the minority." See also Michael A. Meyer, "A Centennial History," *Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion at One Hundred Years*, ed. Samuel E. Karff (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1976), pp. 44–46, 62–69.

10. Meyer, "American Reform Judaism and Zionism," p. 50. See also Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York, 1988), pp. 293–95.

11. Lewis R. Rambo, "Conversion," *The Encyclopedia of Religion* 4 (New York, 1987): pp. 73–79; William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; reprint, New York, 1958), p. 157; Richard Travisano, "Alteration and Conversion as Qualitatively Different Transformations," in *Social Psychology through Symbolic Interaction*, ed. B. P. Stone and Harvey A. Farberman (Waltham, Mass., 1970), p. 594, quoted in John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20 (1981): 375. For a broad survey of current research on religious conversion, see Lewis Rambo's bibliography in *Religious Studies Review* 8 (April 1982): 146–59.

12. My thinking here has been influenced by the literature on "civil religion." See Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York, 1974); Charles S. Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel: Traditional Judaism and Political Culture in the Jewish State* (Berkeley, 1983); Jonathan S. Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington, Ind., 1986).

13. *Maccabaeon* 27 (August 1915): 54.

14. Alice L. Seligsberg, "In the Search for Wisdom," *Maccabaeon* 30 (June/July 1917): 267; see also 29 (February 1917): 151–54. This remarkable autobiographical essay, in which Seligsberg recounts her conversion from Ethical Culture to Zionism, is a revealing case study, albeit somewhat outside the scope of our subject.

15. Robert D. Shapiro, *A Reform Rabbi in the Progressive Era: The Early Career of Stephen S. Wise* (New York, 1988), pp. 30, 46. See p. 39 n. 69, where Shapiro effectively refutes contrary claims by previous scholars.

16. Max Raisin, *Misefer hayai: Zikhronot ve-reshimot otobiografim* (New York, 1956), p. 45. See also Rachel Hertzman, "An American Rabbi: A Translation of Four Essays from Max Raisin's *Dapim mipinkaso shel rabi*" (ordination thesis, Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, 1985), p. 4. Raisin's older brother, Jacob Raisin, was also a Zionist when he entered Hebrew Union College.

17. Examples include Abba Hillel Silver, Abraham J. Feldman, Joseph Baron, and Barnett Brickner. On their participation while still young boys in the Dr. Herzl Zion Club of New York's Lower East Side, founded at the Silver home in 1904, see Marc Lee Raphael, *Abba Hillel Silver: A Profile in American Judaism* (New York, 1989), p. 4.

Zionism in the American Reform Movement || 201

18. Rambo, "Conversion," p. 75. Compare John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965): 864-67, esp. p. 874: "For conversion a person must . . . experience enduring, acutely felt tensions."
19. Yohai Goell, "Aliya in the Zionism of an American Oleh: Judah L. Magnes," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 65 (1975): 100-101; *Like All the Nations: The Life and Legacy of Judah L. Magnes*, ed. William M. Brinner and Moses Rischin (Albany, N.Y., 1987), pp. 5-6, 25, 29-37, 69-70; Judah L. Magnes, *Dissenter in Zion: From the Writings of Judah L. Magnes*, ed. Arthur A. Goren (Cambridge, Mass.: 1982), pp. 7-10.
20. Harvey E. Wessel, "How I Became a Zionist at the Hebrew Union College," *Hebrew Union College Monthly* 6 (May/June 1920): 186-190.
21. According to Max Heller in the *Maccabaeon* 34 (August, 1920): 40. Wessel ("How I Became a Zionist," p. 20) quotes a prominent anti-Zionist rabbi, doubtless David Philipson, as asking, "Are there any students at the Hebrew Union College who are *not* Zionists?" Four years earlier, the *Maccabaeon* 28 (May 1916): 113, reported the pro-Zionist awakening of another Hebrew Union College student, Harry R. Richmond, which it took as evidence of "how the Zionist ideal is gradually increasing its hold upon the educated Jewish Youth in America."
22. *New York Times*, November 14, 1921, p. 15; *Maccabaeon* 3 (1902): 323, 13 (1907): 143; Joseph Silverman, *Pen Picture of the New Palestine* (New York [1924-25], in SC, box/A-78/109, Klau Library, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio; Joseph Stolz, "Joseph Silverman," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook* 41 (1931): 235. See also Marnin Feinstein, *American Zionism, 1884-1904* (New York, 1965), pp. 218-21. The *American Jewish Chronicle* 3 (September 14, 1917): 499, reported that Silverman had purchased a *shekel*, thus acquiring membership in the organization and attended a Zionist dinner, perhaps as a prelude to his subsequent full-scale conversion.
23. Stolz, "Joseph Silverman," p. 234; Martin P. Beifield, "Joseph Krauskopf and Zionism: Partners in Change," *American Jewish History* 75 (1985): 48-60.
24. *Bernhard Felsenthal: Teacher in Israel*, ed. Emma Felsenthal (New York, 1924), p. 81.
25. Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York, 1978), p. 35.
26. Charles Lloyd Cohen, *God's Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (New York, 1986), p. 19.
27. For the beginnings of this awakening, see Jonathan D. Sarna, *JPS: The Americanization of Jewish Culture, 1888-1988* (Philadelphia, 1989), pp. 13-16, and the literature cited therein. Some of what follows has been drawn from that account. My understanding of these phenomena has been shaped by William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago, 1978), and Anthony F. C. Wallace's classic essay, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropology* 58 (1956): 264-81. κ
28. Naomi W. Cohen, "Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age: The Jewish View," *Jewish Social Studies* 41 (1979): 187-210; John Higham, *Send These to Me* (New York, 1975): 116-95.
29. Paul A. Carter, *The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age* (DeKalb, Ill., 1971); Naomi W. Cohen, "The Challenges of Darwinism and Biblical Criticism to American Judaism," *Modern Judaism* 4 (May 1984): 121-57; Benny Kraut, "Judaism Triumphant: Isaac Mayer Wise on Unitarianism and Liberal Christianity," *AJS Review* 7-8 (1982-83): esp. 202-25.
30. David Stern to Bernhard Felsenthal, April 24, 1884, Bernhard Felsenthal Papers, American Jewish Historical Society, Waltham, Mass.
31. *Jewish Times*, January 22, 1875, p. 760.
32. In a letter to Theodor Herzl, March 28, 1899, Richard Gottheil reported on a visit to Hebrew Union College, where he met "at least ten or twelve students who are ardent Zionists and good workers in the local Zionist society." Cited in Feinstein, *American Zionism*, p. 175. See also n. 9, above.
33. Theodor Herzl himself wrote that "American Jews would show the greatest patriotic devotion to America by helping us." He explained that "the aid offered by Zionism is the diversion

See now Jonathan D. Sarna
 "The Late Nineteenth-Century
 American Jewish Awakening:
 Religious Diversity and
 American Jewish History"
 ed. W. H. Conrad + S. B.
 W. S. (Athens, GA) 199
 1-25

202 || JONATHAN D. SARNA

of the stream of persecuted immigrants." See *Maccabaeon* 5 (August 1903): 121; 9 (November 1905): 243. Max Margolis admitted that his early aversion to Zionism stemmed from precisely this point: "I believed that American Zionists were actuated by what I considered an ignoble motive, namely the desire of diverting immigration." *Maccabaeon* 12 (March 1907): 97.

34. *American Hebrew* 61 (May 7, 1897): 18. See also Victor L. Ludlow, "Bernhard Felsenthal: Quest for Zion" (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1979), esp. pp. 236ff. Felsenthal had expressed similar views as early as 1891. See Anita L. Lebeson, "Zionism Comes to Chicago," in *Early History of Zionism in America*, ed. Isidore S. Meyer (New York, 1958), p. 173.

35. *Maccabaeon* 5 (July 1903): 15. See Zvi Hirsch Masliansky's description of Rabbi Adolph Radin's conversion in Gary P. Zola, "The People's Preacher: A Study of the Life and Writings of Zvi Hirsch Masliansky (1856-1943)" (ordination thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1982), p. 176, translation of Masliansky's memoirs (New York, 1929), p. 201.

36. *Maccabaeon* 4 (June 1903): 340. See also Philip E. Schoenberg, "The American Reaction to the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 63 (March 1974): esp. 267-68. Emil G. Hirsch also became more positively inclined toward Zionism in the wake of the pogrom. See Moshe Davis, "Jewish Religious Life and Institutions in America," in *The Jews*, ed. Louis Finkelstein, 3d ed. (New York, 1960), p. 543; and Hirsch's own comments in *Russia at the Bar of the American People*, ed. Isidore Singer (New York, 1904), p. xxvi. But compare *Maccabaeon* 31 (June 1918): 145.

37. See Friesel, *Hatenuah hazionit*, p. 63.

38. *Maccabaeon* 2 (1905): 62.

39. *American Hebrew* 62 (December 10, 1897): 163. Yonathan Shapiro, *Leadership of the American Zionist Organization, 1897-1930* (Urbana, Ill., 1971), mistakenly attributes this address to Rabbi Gustav Gottheil, Richard's father.

40. *HUC Journal* 3 (December 1898): 61. As Michael Meyer notes, William H. Fineshriber later became "one of the severest critics of Political Zionism." "A Centennial History," p. 45.

41. *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, December 12, 1901. See also Shapiro, *Leadership of the American Zionist Organization*, p. 30; Zola, "Reform Judaism's Premier Zionist," pp. 380-81; Max Heller, "Our Spiritual Golus," *Maccabaeon* 30 (August 1917): 314-15.

42. Max Heller, "Zionism as the Leaven," *Maccabaeon* 20 (March/April 1911): 95-96.

43. *Bernhard Felsenthal*, ed. Emma Felsenthal, p. 79.

44. Henrietta Szold to Elvira N. Solis, December 12, 1909, in Marvin Lowenthal, *Henrietta Szold: Life and Letters* (New York, 1942), p. 67.

45. Years later, Horace Kallen made the same claim regarding Zionism's effect upon him. Asked what role Zionism had played in his life, he explained that it "was a channel in which I became again a whole person." Sarah Schmidt, "A Conversation with Horace M. Kallen: The Zionist Chapter of His Life," *Reconstructionist* 41 (November 1975): 33.

46. *Dissenter in Zion*, ed. Goren, p. 65; see also *Like All the Nations*, ed. Brinner and Rischin, pp. 6, 70.

47. Wessel, "How I Became a Zionist at the Hebrew Union College," p. 186.

48. Meyer, "American Reform Judaism and Zionism," p. 50.

49. *Maccabaeon* 31 (July 1918): 180.

50. See Arnold M. Eisen, *The Chosen People in America* (Bloomington, Ind., 1983), esp. pp. 19-21, 53-72.

51. Meyer, "American Reform Judaism and Zionism," pp. 54-55. See also Naomi W. Cohen, "The *Maccabaeon's* Message: A Study in American Zionism until World War I," *Jewish Social Studies* 18 (1956): 165-66.

52. See, for example, Leo Jung, *Faith* (New York, 1968), pp. 19, 61. See also Michael Meyer's comments in *Zion* 46 (1981): 56; Max Wiener, "The Concept of Mission in Traditional and Modern Judaism," *YIVO Annual* 2-3 (1947-48): 23-24.

53. Allon Gal, "The Mission Motif in American Zionism, 1898-1948," *American Jewish*

Zionism in the American Reform Movement II 203

- History* 75 (June 1986): 363-85; Gal, "Independence and Universal Mission in Modern Jewish Nationalism: A Comparative Analysis of European and American Zionism (1897-1948)," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 5 (1989): 242-55, esp. the comments of Arthur A. Goren, pp. 261-62. For other early efforts to reconcile "Israel's mission" and Zionism, see Bernhard Felsenthal, "Israel's Mission," *Maccabaeon* 4 (March 1903): 135; and see esp. Max Heller, "Zionism and the Mission," *Maccabaeon* 20 (July 1911): 232-33, which won editorial endorsement, in advance, as a "new interpretation . . . with which Zionists will agree without condition or qualifications." 19 (January 1911): 255. By 1917, the new synthesis was already fully articulated. See Martin A. Meyer, "Zionism and Reform Judaism," *Maccabaeon* 30 (January 1917): 130: "Zionism holds that the mission of Israel . . . can only be realized by the creation of a Jewish center in which Jews will live so normal a life, so complete a Jewish life that the force of this example will influence not only all Jews, both those of the Homeland and of the Diaspora, but also all the peoples of the world." For Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver's role in spreading this new gospel, see Leon Feuer, "The Influence of Abba Hillel Silver on the Evolution of Reform Judaism," in *Rational Faith: Essays in Honor of Rabbi Levi A. Olan*, ed. Jack Bemporad (New York, 1977), pp. 80-87. See now Mark A. Raider et al., *Abba Hillel Silver and American Zionism* (London, 1997).
54. See Evyatar Friesel, "American Zionism and American Jewry: An Ideological and Communal Encounter," *American Jewish Archives* 40 (April 1988): esp. 7-9; Melvin I. Urofsky, "Zionism: An American Experience," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 63 (March 1974): 261-82.
55. *American Israelite*, December 29, 1898, quoted in Dena Wilansky, *Sinai to Cincinnati* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1937), p. 127; Oscar S. Straus, *The Origin of Republican Form of Government* (1885; reprint New York, 1901), p. 101; David Philipson, "Judaism and the Republican Form of Government," *Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook* 2 (1892): 53, 55. See also Ben Halpern, *The American Jew: A Zionist Analysis* (New York, 1956), pp. 11-33.
56. *Maccabaeon* 20 (March/April 1911): 96.
57. Caspar Levias, "The Justification of Zionism," *HUC Journal* 3 (April 1899): 174. See also Richard Gottheil, *The Aims of Zionism* (New York, 1899), pp. 18-19, quoted in Friesel, *Hatenuah hazionit*, pp. 256-57.
58. *HUC Journal* 5 (October 1900): 27.
59. Louis Lipsky, "The Duty of American Jews," reprinted in Friesel, *Hatenuah hazionit*, p. 205. For a brief comparison of Puritans and Zionists, see Feinstein, *American Zionism*, p. 220.
60. Louis D. Brandeis, *The Jewish Problem: How To Solve It*, new ed. (Cleveland, 1934), pp. 21-22. See now Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Greatest Jew in the World Since Jesus Christ: The Jewish Legacy of Louis D. Brandeis," *American Jewish History* 81 (1990): 346-364.
61. The lecture is frequently misdated. In fact, it was delivered on April 25 and released in printed form in late June. See Brandeis to Louis Lipsky, June 1, 1915, in *Letters of Louis D. Brandeis*, ed. Melvin I. Urofsky and David W. Levy (Albany, N.Y. 1971-), 3:525.
62. *Maccabaeon* 26 (May 1915): 95. See also Maurice H. Harris, "Zionism: An Appreciation from a Non-Zionist," *American Hebrew* 98 (March 17, 1916): 530-31.
63. Max Heller, "Zionism and Our Reform Rabbinate," *Maccabaeon* 31 (July 1918): 190. Of seventy-eight who responded, Heller classified twenty as Zionists, eighteen as anti-Zionists, twenty-seven as sympathizers, and thirteen as "non-descript (betwixt and between)."

Abba Hillel Silver and American Zionism
(London, 1997).

Since Jesus Christ: The Jewish Legacy of Louis D. Brandeis
American Jewish History 81
(1990): 346-364.