



# AMERICAN JEWS AND THE FLAG OF ISRAEL

Jonathan D. Sarna

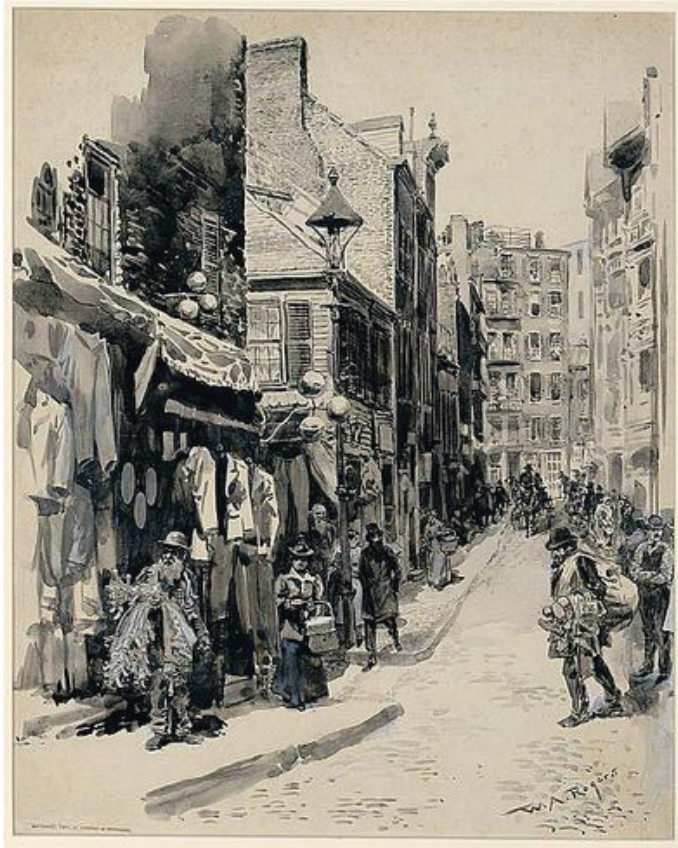
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**Boston in the 1890s**  
A community of about 35,000 Jews



**170 Hanover Street**  
Address of Zion Hall in Boston's North End



Governor Charlie Baker's trade mission to Israel, in which Brandeis University President Ron Liebowitz and so many other business and civic leaders are participating, is devoted to strengthening the ties between Massachusetts and the State of Israel. My goal here is to demonstrate that these ties stretch back much farther than generally known. Indeed, they actually precede the first Zionist Congress of 1897, and they embrace not only economic and ideological ties but even the flag of the State of Israel, which, as we shall see, has significant — if not widely known — connections to Boston and the United States.

The Boston Jewish community was small in 1890, but already it was robustly Zionist. A total of about 35,000 Jews lived in the city, the majority of whom were recent immigrants from Lithuania, where, in Jewish circles, love of Zion was commonplace. In Boston, Zionism faced fewer obstacles than in many other American cities. Boston's large Irish population loved Ireland, so there was understanding and sympathy for Jews who loved Zion. This helped to both legitimate and promote pro-Zionist sentiment in the community.<sup>1</sup>

According to an 1891 article that appeared in *Ha-Zvi*, the Hebraist newspaper published in Ottoman Palestine and edited by the great Hebrew lexicographer Eliezer ben Yehuda, there were some 700 members of Hovevei Zion in Boston, as well as 100 members of Daughters of Zion and 70 members of a newly formed organization named B'nai Zion. I wonder if any other American city at that time boasted so high a percentage of Zionists.<sup>2</sup>

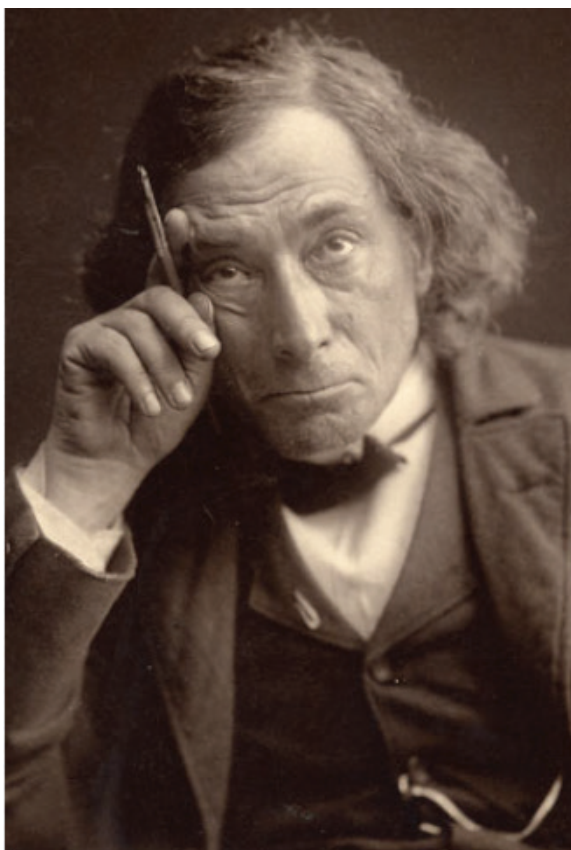
B'nai Zion plays an important role in our story. Founded on January 18, 1891, it was an organization for ambitious, upwardly mobile and, in many cases, college-educated young men. They were children of Zionistically inclined immigrants (hence the appropriateness of the name B'nai Zion, “sons of Zion”), who committed themselves to furthering “the moral, intellectual and social status” of Jews generally and of themselves in particular. As part of this effort to uplift, they promoted the study of Hebrew language and literature, and to this end they rented space at 170 Hanover Street in Boston's North End and set up a Jewish library, reading room and meeting hall, which they named Zion Hall. Many of the leading Jews of Boston — lawyers, judges, doctors and business leaders, the people who created Boston's core Jewish institutions and also became engaged in general civic life — belonged as young men to B'nai Zion. And the foremost Jews of the day, including Louis Brandeis, spoke at Zion Hall.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Mark A. Raider, “Pioneers and Pacesetters: Boston Jews and American Zionism,” *The Jews of Boston*, eds., Jonathan D. Sarna et al, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 249-282.

2 *Ha-Zvi*, March 13, 1891, p. 3.

3 *Jewish Advocate* (March 7, 1941), 1; (September 7, 1950), 2.



**Naftali Herz Imber**  
Author of *Hatikvah*, who frequented Zion Hall  
in the early 1890s

Naftali Herz Imber, the eccentric national poet and author of the Zionist anthem, *Hatikvah*, spent lots of time at Zion Hall in the early 1890s. When not in an alcoholic stupor, he read and wrote there, and B'nai Zion members helped to support him.<sup>4</sup>

Among the central leaders of B'nai Zion in its early years were men with the last name Askowith, scions of one of Boston's most storied Jewish families. The family patriarch, Rabbi Jacob Baruch Askowith (1844-1908), arrived in Boston in 1884 from Kovno [today, Kaunas] in Lithuania, where he had studied with the famous Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Spektor. Askowith was also the much-beloved friend and nephew (they were about the same age) of Rabbi Aryeh Leib Frumkin, the well-known scholar, writer and Zionist pioneer. The same Lithuanian Jewish diaspora that influenced Jewish life in Israel (*Lita BeYerushalayim*) thus also influenced Jewish life in Boston.<sup>5</sup>

Seven years after his arrival in Boston, Rabbi Jacob Baruch Askowith, in 1891, designed the B'nai Zion flag. "My father...had charge of decorating the hall for the public opening," his son, Charles, recalled in a memoir. "Bunting and flags of all nations with Biblical mottoes under the flags were part of the decorations. There being no Jewish flag available, he proceeded to design one."<sup>6</sup> It is not surprising that Rabbi Askowith took the initiative here, for he was likewise involved in the establishment of several other Jewish communal institutions, including a synagogue, a Hebrew School and a society for Talmudic learning. The *Jewish Advocate* described him, upon his death, as one of Boston's "sanest and most widely learned men."<sup>7</sup> When things needed to be done within the Jewish immigrant community, he was often called upon to do them.

Like so many immigrant Jews and Catholics of that time, Rabbi Askowith and his wife, Sara Golde (nee Arenovski, 1850-1929), produced a large family — five boys and six girls.<sup>8</sup> The children took full advantage of the unparalleled educational opportunities in Boston, excelling in the public schools and attending the best universities. One daughter, Dora Askowith (1884-1958), later won fame as an instructor at Hunter College and a writer; she also was one of the first women in history to undertake rabbinical studies.

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<sup>4</sup> *Jewish Advocate* (July 20, 1950), 3.

<sup>5</sup> The Frumkin legacy also extends further: Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the renowned former chief rabbi of London, is likewise one of his descendants. Dora Askowith discusses her ties to Rabbi Frumkin in *Jewish Advocate* (March 17, 1927), p. C123 and (May 16, 1941), p. 5; see also the notice concerning Askowith family genealogy in *Jewish Advocate* (November 11, 1954), 11. For the history of the Frumkin family, see the family's website, <http://www.frumkin.org.il>. Imanuel Etkes, *Lita Beyerushalayim* (Jerusalem: 1991), 163 contains a letter from Frumkin's father, writing in 1865, referring to his "grandson, Jacob Baruch." Presumably he was the son of one of Frumkin's much older sisters from their father's first marriage.

<sup>6</sup> *Jewish Advocate* (June 26, 1952), D9.

<sup>7</sup> *Jewish Advocate* (February 14, 1908), 4; Dora Askowith recalled her father's piety in *Jewish Advocate* (September 7, 1934), 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Jewish Advocate* (Nov. 7, 1929) lists the 10 children that survived at that time; Elias Askowith, a founder of B'nai Zion, died prematurely, in 1905.

Scholars recall her today as one of the women who might have been a rabbi had that opportunity been extended to her.<sup>9</sup> Other children, notably the celebrated dentist Charles Askowith (1875-1969)<sup>10</sup>, whose memoir I cited, became important in medicine, business and Jewish communal life. All told, the name “Askowith” appeared no fewer than 338 times in the Boston *Jewish Advocate* from 1909 to 1990. The newspaper recognized the Askowiths as pillars of the Jewish community and recorded the milestones in their lives.

The flag that Jacob Askowith created in 1891 for B’nai Zion contained three critical design elements that we associate with the flag of Israel.<sup>11</sup> First, the colors blue and white. By the late 19th century, these had become Jews’ “national colors.” “Blue and white are the colors of Judah,” an Austrian Jewish poet named Ludwig August Frankl sang out in 1864. “White is the radiance of the priesthood, and blue, the splendors of the firmament.”<sup>12</sup> The explanations vary, but those two colors have remained the defining colors of the Jewish people to the present day. The second design element of the flag were the two horizontal stripes, echoing the stripes of the *tallith*, the Jewish prayer shawl. And the third element was a central hexagram, or Star of David (Magen David). Long known as a Jewish emblem in Prague, it made its first architectural appearance within a synagogue in the United States only in 1845. By the 1890s, though, it had become internationally recognized as a Jewish symbol, parallel to the Christian cross.<sup>13</sup> Rabbi Askowith inscribed the word “Maccabee” in Hebrew letters within that Star of David, recalling the heroic family of the second century BCE that, according to Jewish tradition, cast off foreign rule, liberated Jerusalem and its holy Temple, and re-established a self-governing Jewish state in the land of Israel, events commemorated on the Jewish holiday of Chanukah.

Charles Askowith recounts that he painted this flag, known at that time as the “Flag of Judah,” according to his father’s specifications. He then unfurled the flag at the dedication exercises for Zion Hall, where he proudly recited “The Banner of the Jew,” by the poet laureate of the nascent American Zionist movement, Emma Lazarus. Lazarus’

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9 Miller, Adinah S., “Dora Askowith.” *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 1 March 2009. Jewish Women’s Archive. (Viewed on November 27, 2016) <<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/askowith-dora>>; Pamela S. Nadell, *Women Who Would Be Rabbis* (New York: Beacon, 1998), 77-80.

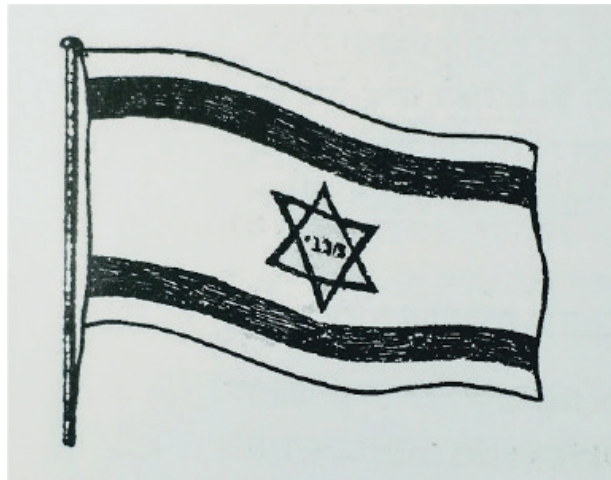
10 *Jewish Advocate* (December 29, 1949, 2; (April 3, 1969), A13.

11 On these elements, see Alec Mishory, *Lo and Behold: Zionist Icons and Visual Symbols in Israeli Culture* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2000), 122-128 [in Hebrew].

12 Ludwig A. Frankel, “Juda’s Farben” *Abnenbilder* (Leipzig, 1864) 127: “Weiss ist der priesterliche Glanz/ und blau des Himmels Glanzen;” for a discussion of the Zionist significance of this poem and the history of the colors blue and white in Jewish sources, see Mordecai Eliav, “Le-Korotav Shel Ha-Degel Ha-Tsiyoni,” *Kivunim* 3 (1979/70), 49-59.

13 Gershom Scholem, “The Star of David: History of a Symbol,” *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 257-281; W. Gunther Plaut, *The Magen David* (Washington, D.C.: B’nai B’rith Books, 1991); Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 106-7.





1891 B'nai Zion flag  
Created by Rabbi Jacob B. Askowith  
Hebrew word "Maccabee" in center

**FLAG OF JUDAH.**

*Boston Daily Globe (1872-1922); Oct 22, 1892; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Boston Daily Globe*  
pg. 6

**FLAG OF JUDAH.**

**It Was Carried in Boston for the First Time Yesterday.**

The Bnai Zion Educational Society, the Congregational Beth Israel and Association Tifereth Israel, North End Hebrew organizations, participated in the observance of Columbus day yesterday.

At 11 o'clock in the forenoon members of these societies to the number of 400 gathered at Zion Hall, 170 Hanover st., and shortly after that hour the line of march was formed with the following gentlemen in charge: Chief marshal, L. Askowitz; staff, C. Askowitz, A. Pinkofsky, H. Dino, H. Shafer; aids, Barnet Gordon, Simon Dangle, S. Fleischmann, S. Franks and L. W. Wolfson.

The route of the parade was as follows: Hanover, Washington, School, Tremont, Court, Green, Lovett, Minot, Lowell, Mortuac, Hanover, Parmenter, Salem, Cooper, Endicott, Cross, Salem sts., to the Baldwin Place synagogue.

The City Brigade band headed the procession and the flag of Judah, which was carried alongside the American flag, was the first of its kind ever seen in Boston.

At the Baldwin Place synagogue at 1.30 o'clock appropriate exercises were held, Mr. Samuel H. Borofsky presiding. The President's and Governor's proclamations were read by the chairman. Rabbi M. Z. Margolis delivered an appropriate address.

The reception committee at these exercises was Messrs. D. Barnet, S. Bloom, M. Leibmann, H. A. Halkon, S. Cohen, N. Tietbaum and Hayman Cohen.

*The Boston Globe* reports on "flag of Judah"  
October 22, 1892 article



1892 B'nai Zion "flag of Judah"  
Carried in streets of Boston and hung in Zion Hall

most famous poem, “The New Colossus” (“Give me your tired, your poor...”), adorns the Statue of Liberty and helped to define America as a land welcoming of immigrants. Yet it was “The Banner of the Jew,” her Zionist poem, that provided the perfect accompaniment for the flag of Judah, for it called upon Jews to recall “the Maccabean clan” and “to rise anew/To lift the Banner of the Jew.”<sup>14</sup>

Rabbi Askowith’s “flag of Judah” debuted on the streets of Boston a year after Zion Hall opened. In 1892, as part of the gala nationwide celebration of the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s voyage to the New World, a grand parade snaked its way through the city; some 400 Jews participated. Led by Charles and Elias Askowith, among others, the Jewish marchers set forth from Zion Hall proudly carrying the “flag of Judah” alongside the American flag. A headline in *The Boston Globe* captured the scene. “Flag of Judah,” it read. “It Was Carried in Boston for the First Time Yesterday.” The short accompanying article recounts that the flag of Judah was “the first of its kind ever seen in Boston.”<sup>15</sup> This parade took place, of course, five years before the First Zionist Congress in Basle.

Dora Askowith subsequently revealed that the flag carried in Columbus’ honor was a “slightly altered version” of the original in Zion Hall. It was larger and more professionally produced, “made by a firm on Tremont Street,” and the word “Zion” in Hebrew letters now replaced the word “Maccabee.” In addition, the name of the society, B’nai Zion, was inscribed on the flag’s blue stripes. A smaller “flag of Judah,” sewn by two Askowith daughters, was likewise carried in the parade, under the auspices of the B’noth Zion Society, the female counterpart of the B’nai Zion, which was itself founded by one Askowith and headed by another. Thereafter, according to Dora Askowith, “the larger flag was encased in a cabinet and hung on the wall of Zion Hall,” where no visitor could miss it. In 1905, after Zion Hall had closed down and upon the untimely death of Elias Askowith, this historic 1892 flag was interred with him.<sup>16</sup>

By then, the “flag of Judah” had become known as the Zionist flag or the Hebrew flag, for it flew in 1898 at the Second Zionist Congress in Basle and captured wide public attention, especially in the United States. America’s premier English-language Jewish newspaper, *The American Hebrew*, provided a thick description of the congress, underscoring the flag’s centrality and symbolic significance:

*Every international train in Basle is met by a representative of the [Congress] Bureau, bearing. . . the Zionist flag, blue and white with the Magen David, so that delegates may immediately on their arrival*

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14 Emma Lazarus, “The Banner of the Jew,” *Poems of Emma Lazarus*, vol. 2, 10-12 online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/amverse/BAK3042.0001.001/1:8?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>; on Lazarus, see Esther Schor, *Emma Lazarus* (New York: Schocken, 2006). Dora Askowith in her study (see n.16) claims that the “flag of Judah” was first unfurled on July 24, 1891, and the ceremony and recitation took place later that year, in December.

15 *The Boston Globe* (October 22, 1892), 6.

16 Dora Askowith, “The First Zionist Flag,” *Jewish Social Studies* 6 (January 1944), 55-57.



**Postcard of the Stadtcasino**

At the time of the Second Zionist Congress, Basel, Switzerland, circa 1898; note the two Zionist flags  
Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem

be afforded all the information they need, and, if desired, be conveyed in carriages waiting for them to the Congress Office. . . . If another reminder is necessary it is afforded by the blue rosette, with the Shield of David, which is worn by the members of the Congress, who are to be seen everywhere. From the balcony of the Casino itself may be seen proudly floating the Zionist flag in company with the National flag, and even the drivers of the fiacres engaged by the Bureau wear the emblem on their coat sleeves. Apropos of the display of flags an extraordinary demonstration of goodwill was made by the bands of gymnasts who paraded the streets today on the occasion of St. Jacob's Feast. As they passed the Congress Hall and saw the National flag they shouted with all their might: "Hoch die Juden" (Long Live the Jews), a sentiment that, unhappily, would be expressed in very few civilized countries at the present time.<sup>17</sup>

A photograph of the 1898 flag flying atop the casino survives, and its resemblance to the Askowith flag is uncanny.<sup>18</sup> *The Boston Globe* missed that resemblance, but it did take notice of the excitement surrounding the flag. "One of the results of the Zionist congress at Basle is the reappearance of the Hebrew Flag," it told its readers. "At the meeting place of the delegates, a flag was hoisted which had two blue strips on a white field and between these the six-pointed star or sign of David." The *Globe* then added a significant statement that reveals much about the wide subsequent embrace of this flag. "Pictures and descriptions of the flag came to the United States with accounts of the proceedings of the congress, and dwellers in the New York Ghetto began to look for Hebrew flags."<sup>19</sup>

The "reappearance of the Hebrew flag" marked an important turning point in the history of the Zionist movement. With the rise of the modern nation-state, flags came to define, symbolize and unify nations; they served as prime markers of cultural identity.<sup>20</sup> Theodor Herzl himself recognized this. "We have no flag, and we need one," he wrote in *The Jewish State*. "If we desire to lead many men, we must raise a symbol above their heads."<sup>21</sup>

America, too, beginning in the late 19th century, witnessed what has been called a "cult of the flag."<sup>22</sup> The aftermath of the divisive Civil War, followed by the immigration of millions of foreigners to America's shores, generated — even more than in Europe — a

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17 *American Hebrew* (September 16, 1898), 569.

18 See the photo in Raider, "Pioneers and Pacesetters," 253.

19 *The Boston Globe* (November 17, 1898), p. 8.

20 Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Richard Jenkins (eds.) *Flag, Nation and Symbolism in Europe and America* (New York & London: Routledge, 2007); Rune Saugmann Andersen, Xavier Guillaume, and Juha A. Vuor, "Flags," in Mark B. Salter (ed.) *Making Things International* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), online at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1b9s0d9.13>.

21 Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State* (Filiquarian Publishing, 2006), originally published in 1896, pp. 85-86; see also Herzl's letter to Baron Hirsch (June 3, 1895) in *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, ed. Raphael Patai (New York: Herzl Press, 1960), I, 27: "With a flag one can lead men wherever one wants to, even into the Promised Land."

22 Scott Michael Guenter, *The American Flag, 1777-1924: Cultural Shifts from Creation to Codification* (Ph.D., University of Maryland, 1986), esp. 19, 144-229, online at <http://resources.library.brandeis.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/resources.library.brandeis.edu/docview/303422672?accountid=9703>.



civil religious devotion to the national flag as an emblem of national unity. America soon pioneered the world in developing flag-related holidays and rituals, such as Flag Day (beginning in 1877), the National Flag Code (1923; enacted into law in 1942), and the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag (first composed in 1887, revised in 1892 and adopted by Congress in 1942). Against this background, the frenzy generated by the “flag of Judah” in Boston in 1892 and the Zionist or Hebrew flag in Basle in 1898 becomes more readily comprehensible. The flag symbolized, especially to American Jews, the rebirth of the scattered Jewish nation.

How a flag designed by Rabbi Askowith in Boston ended up flying from the balcony of a casino in Basle remains something of a mystery. Two accounts survive, both involving Jews named Harris. One credits a member of B’nai Zion named Isaac Harris (1875-1927), an important Boston Zionist and attorney, who, according to the story, traveled to Basle in 1897 and urged adoption of the Askowith flag. Another story credits a young awning- and flag-maker named Morris Harris (1874-1952) from New York and Stamford, Connecticut, who spontaneously designed the flag after the first Zionist Congress in 1897, which his dutiful mother, Lena, then sewed. Both stories, unfortunately, are historically problematic. Isaac Harris of Boston was not in Basle in 1897, but only got there in 1903 for the Sixth Zionist Congress.<sup>23</sup> Morris Harris, an immigrant from Lithuania, never made it to Basle at all.<sup>24</sup>

What is fascinating, nevertheless, is that both stories credit America as the place where the flag of Israel originated — this at a time when America played but a minimal role in Zionist history.<sup>25</sup> Admittedly, there are other stories of the flag’s creation. Historian Mordecai Eliav once enumerated five different locations where Zionist flags reputedly first flew (Russia, Rishon LeZion, Ness Ziona, Boston and London) and a host of individuals, including Herzl’s top aid and successor, David Wolffsohn, who took credit for designing the flag that subsequently became Israel’s.<sup>26</sup> All that can be said with certainty is that the 1898 Second Zionist Congress played a pivotal role in popularizing the “Zionist flag” in America, and that the flag flown at that Congress, so similar to the

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23 See the obituary for Isaac Harris in *Jewish Advocate* (June 7, 1928), 1; and for his recollection of meeting Theodor Herzl on August 22, 1903, at the Sixth Zionist Congress, *Jewish Advocate* (August 4, 1905), 2. The unsubstantiated claim that Harris brought the flag to Basle in 1897 was made, among others, by Charles Askowith; see *Jewish Advocate* (June 26, 1952), D9.

24 The loving website dedicated to Morris Harris and crediting him with the design for the flag of Israel admits that Harris “never left his adopted country.” While, as a flag-maker, he undoubtedly produced many Zionist flags in America, it seems most likely that he modeled his flags after the one flown in Basle in 1898, not the other way around. See <http://www.flag-of-israel.org> (accessed November 25, 2016).

25 Evyatar Friesel, *The Zionist Movement in the United States, 1897-1914* (Tel Aviv: Kibbutz Hameuhad, 1970) [in Hebrew]; Marnin Feinstein, *American Zionism 1884-1904* (New York: Herzl Press, 1965).

26 Eliav, “Le-Korotav Shel Ha-Degel Ha-Tsiyoni,” 49-59; Alex Bein, “The First Zionist Flag,” *Jewish Social Studies* 7 (April 1945), 150.



Isaac Harris (1875-1927)  
Boston Zionist and attorney



Morris Harris (1874-1952)  
Awning- and flag-maker

Askowith flag, served as the prototype for widely publicized Zionist flags that fluttered across the United States over the next 50 years.

Shortly after the Zionist Congress, for example, a “Zionist flag” flew in Providence, R.I., “flanked by the Stars and Stripes.”<sup>27</sup> Then, in early 1899, the energetic and pro-Zionist Reform rabbi Stephen S. Wise reported to readers of the *American Hebrew* that the “original Zionist flag that had floated over the Congress Hall at Basle” was, thanks to him, displayed in Montreal at a Zionist event.<sup>28</sup> The appearance of that “original” flag in North America so soon after the Second Zionist Congress ended lends credence to the idea that it may have originated in North America, but that as yet cannot be demonstrated conclusively.

Significantly, in 1899, a quite different “Zionist flag” flew in Basle at the Third Zionist Congress, remaining in use through 1904. Theodor Herzl himself designed it. While it displayed the traditional stripes and the familiar Star of David, it also featured a “Lion of Judah” in the middle of the star, as well as seven additional stars — one in each of the six triangles of the big star and one more on top — to symbolize the proposed working day of “seven golden hours” that Herzl advocated for the future Jewish State. Postcards from the Congress transmitted images of this Zionist flag across Europe.<sup>29</sup>

In the United States, however, the flag first seen in Boston continued to hold sway. That wonderfully simple flag — white background, two blue stripes and a central Star of David — made a celebrated reappearance at the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis. The St. Louis World’s Fair featured a large Hall of Nations around which many a national flag fluttered. In 1904, for the first time ever, the Zionist flag flew among those other flags, thereby providing the movement both official public recognition and national legitimation. The Library of Congress preserves a contemporary photograph of that Zionist flag, and its resemblance to the Askowith flag, the flag flown at the Second Zionist Congress and the future flag of the State of Israel is quite evident.<sup>30</sup> At the 1905 Seventh Zionist Congress in Basle, news of the flag displayed in St. Louis set off “perhaps the greatest display of jubilation at the Congress.”<sup>31</sup> That same decade, Jewish New Year cards published in New York displayed the flag’s image; it was likewise printed on fancy cigarette papers that survive. This is the “Zionist flag” that became standard in America.

In 1915, a Zionist flag identical to the one flown in St. Louis flew from a steamer carrying Zionist leaders to the extraordinarily important 1915 Zionist Convention in Boston,

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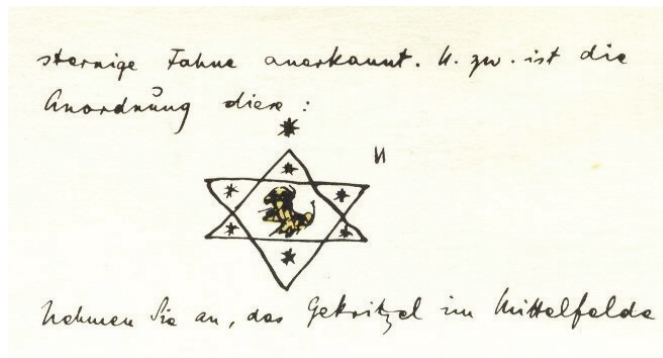
27 *American Hebrew* (December 16, 1898), 252.

28 *American Hebrew* (February 10, 1899), 527.

29 Michael Berkowitz, *Zionist Culture and West European Jewry Before the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 23-25.

30 <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3a42927> (accessed November 27, 2016).

31 Berkowitz, *Zionist Culture and West European Jewry*, 25.



Theodor Herzl's design for the Zionist flag  
 Lion of Judah in center with seven small stars symbolizing his proposed seven-hour workday



Third Zionist Congress (1899)  
 Flag based on Theodor Herzl's design



Zionist flag at 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis  
 Courtesy of the Library of Congress





Jewish New Year cards with image from Zionist flag



Cigarette paper featuring Zionist flag and *Hatikvah*



headed by Louis Brandeis. Once again, the event made headlines: “First Display of Flag on Seaboard,” *The Boston Globe* reported. It explained that while “the display of the Zionist flag from public buildings began with the St. Louis Fair...this is the first time that it will be flown from a coastwise vessel in American waters.” A surviving photograph confirms that the flags flown at the convention were simple blue and white flags, like those paraded down the streets of Boston in 1892 and displayed at the World’s Fair in St. Louis in 1904.<sup>32</sup>

Subsequently, whenever the term “Zionist flag” was used in America, it referred to that very same flag design, rather than to the flag designed by Theodor Herzl or to other Zionist flags that remained popular in Europe and Palestine. The American version of the Zionist flag also became the official flag of the World Zionist Organization. And we recognize that same flag as the flag of the State of Israel. But it turns out, that was not a foregone conclusion — and once again, American Jews played a decisive role.

When Israel’s founders proclaimed the new state in May 1948, some of them called for a flag distinctly different from the Zionist flag, in order to distinguish the new State of Israel from the worldwide Zionist movement that had worked so hard to achieve it. Sensitive leaders like Moshe Sharett (Shertok) aimed in this way to protect diaspora Zionists from charges of dual loyalty. However, designing a flag that all sectors of Israeli society would accept proved no easy task, especially with the country at war. It was therefore decided to ask the Israeli people themselves for suggestions. Some 164 flag designs poured in. That, of course, did not make the choice any easier, so before making any decision, Sharett decided to seek the views of diaspora Jewish leaders.<sup>33</sup>

Fascinatingly American Zionists opposed every one of the proposed new flags. They argued that the world had come to respect the original Zionist flag, that it had become hallowed by tradition, and that it should be preserved as the new State of Israel’s flag as well. The great American Zionist leader Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver of Cleveland took the lead in insisting that the Zionist flag become the national flag of Israel, with as little change as possible.<sup>34</sup>

And that, in the end, is what happened. In November 1948, six months after the State of Israel had been proclaimed, a flag closely resembling the very one that the Askowiths had created in Boston back in 1891 became the official flag of the State of Israel. Today it symbolizes, among many things, the historically close ties between the State of Massachusetts and the State of Israel — ties that Governor Baker’s trade mission is perpetuating and, one hopes, further expanding.

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<sup>32</sup> *The Boston Globe*, June 26, 1915, p. 4; July 1, 1915, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Mishory, *Lo and Behold*, 128-136.

<sup>34</sup> Mishory, *Lo and Behold*, 133.

**JEW'S WAR STAKE BIG, SAY ZIONISTS.: SOLUTION OF THEIR GREATEST ...**  
*Boston Daily Globe (1872-1922); Jul 1, 1915; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Boston Globe*  
pg. 3

# **JEW'S WAR STAKE BIG, SAY ZIONISTS.**

**Solution of Their Greatest Problem Hoped For—Convention Activities  
Are Shifted to Chelsea For a Day.**



1915 Zionist convention in Boston  
*The Boston Globe* (July 1, 1915)



Alternative Zionist flags  
Palestine under the British mandate



Alternative Zionist flags  
 Palestine flag in *Larousse Dictionary* (1939)



Proposed 1948 flags for the State of Israel  
 Alec Mishory, *Lo and Behold*



Official flag of the State of Israel







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