

# THE FUTURE OF DIASPORA ZIONISM

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Last time I had the privilege of addressing the Rabbinical Assembly, I began with an apology for speaking about the future and pointed out that historically, indeed going all the way back to Pharaoh Marneptah, predictions about the Jewish future had proved more often wrong than right. This was certainly true with respect to Zionism. Rereading Theodor Herzl's *Altneuland* (1902) reminded me that he foresaw a new society in Palestine where the educated classes spoke – what else? – German. The hero, David, had a baby son in Zion and what did he call him -- the good Jewish name of Friedrich. And best of all, Herzl foresaw a future Zion where “politics. . . is neither a business nor a profession.” “We have kept ourselves unsullied by that plague,” David declares. “People [in Zion] who try to live by spouting their opinions instead of by work are . . . despised, and get no chance to do mischief.”<sup>1</sup> Well, it did not quite turn out that way. Perhaps Richard Gottheil, the first significant American Jewish writer on Zionism was wiser. “To speculate upon the future of Zionism would be absurd,” he wrote in 1914.<sup>2</sup> That admonition may be worth bearing in mind as we proceed.

Before forging ahead, however, I am still enough of a New Yorker to know that I need to look behind me, and in our case a glance backward reveals a full century of history during which time Zionism transformed the Jewish world, including Judaism here in the United States. This year is an especially appropriate time to examine Zionism's impact, on the eve of the centenary of the First Zionist Congress, so let me take a few moments now to enumerate my list of the top ten ways in which Zionism made a profound difference in the way that the Jewish community here in the United States conducted itself. I am mindful of the dangers inherent in such a top ten list – it is no substitute for a full-scale analysis<sup>3</sup> – but nevertheless, here goes:

- (1) Zionism renewed Judaism's commitment to Jewish peoplehood. Where 19<sup>th</sup> Century Judaism, especially Reform Judaism, played down the ethnic aspects of Judaism, preferring to focus upon Judaism as a religion, Zionism made Jewish peoplehood -- national Jewish consciousness -- a central component of Jewish identity.
- (2) Zionism served, in Solomon Schechter's words, as “the great bulwark against assimilation.”<sup>4</sup> Schechter understood as early as 1906 that “Zionism...succeeded in bringing back into the fold many men and women...who otherwise would have been lost to Judaism.”<sup>5</sup> In the decades that followed, the movement brought countless other Jews

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor Herzl, *Old New Land* (New York: Markus Wiener & Herzl Press, 1987 [orig. ed. 1941]), 73, 76.

<sup>2</sup> Richard J.H. Gottheil, *Zionism* (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1914), 215.

<sup>3</sup> See Allon Gal, “The Zionist Influence on American Jewish Life,” *American Jewish Archives* 41 (Fall./Winter 1989), 173-84.

<sup>4</sup> Solomon Schechter, *Seminary Addresses and Other Papers* (New York: Burning Bush Press, 1959), 93.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

who had drifted far from synagogue life back to Judaism, providing them – Louis Brandeis is a prime example – with an alternative Jewish arena in which they could operate as Jews and from which they could draw deep spiritual meaning. In effect, Zionism itself became the religion of many unaffiliated American Jews. Functionally speaking, it served as the “civil religion” of many Jews. It provided the content for what Jonathan Woocher has described as “Civil Judaism.”<sup>6</sup>

- (3) Zionism helped to democratize the structure of the American Jewish community. It appropriated the rhetoric and trappings of democracy in distinguishing itself from its non-Zionist and anti-Zionist opponents, and it undermined the stewardship model of Jewish leadership propounded by the American Jewish Committee.
- (4) Zionism raised American Jewry’s political consciousness. Where 19<sup>th</sup> century Jews, at least in public, disavowed the idea of Jewish group politics, Zionism helped to make such political activities legitimate. Zionism championed a strategy of proud, open, and vigorous defense of Jewish rights in the American public arena.
- (5) Zionism, as Allon Gal has pointed out, “contributed to the advancement of East European Jews in America and to their integration within the more established Jewish community.”<sup>7</sup> Louis Lipsky, Abba Hillel Silver, Rose Halprin, Louis Leventhal – these and many other Jews of East European extraction rose to national significance through the Zionist movement. It served as a training ground for national Jewish leaders.
- (6) Zionism transformed American Jewish philanthropy. Not only did Zion become an increasingly important focus of Jewish giving, but Zionism also introduced into the practice of philanthropy new fundraising tools and methods.
- (7) Zionism provided a common ground for cooperation among the different religious movements in Jewish life. Conservative, Orthodox, and Reform Jews all met together under Zionist auspices thereby reinforcing Zionism’s claim to serve as the “inspiring and unifying” force in Jewish life.<sup>8</sup> [Sadly, that is less and less the case in our day, but it did hold true for much of this century as some here surely recall.]
- (8) Zionism played an important role in the growth of Conservative Judaism and in the revitalization of Reform Judaism in the United States. East European Jews were drawn to Zionism and to those Jewish religious movements that embraced it – Conservative Judaism chief among them. Zionism also inspired Reform Judaism’s renewed twentieth century commitment to Jewish peoplehood, and that in turn, paved the way for Reform Judaism’s twentieth century resurgence.
- (9) Zionist activity coalesced with, and laid the foundation for, the transformation of Jewish education in the United States. Samson Benderly and his disciples, who played the central role in modernizing Jewish education in the United States in the twentieth century all were Zionists (including many who taught at one time or another at the Seminary’s Teacher’s Institute). The Hebraists who gained control of Jewish education under Benderly made love-of-Zion central to the Hebrew, *Ivrit-be-Ivrit* curriculum that they championed.
- (10) Finally, Zionism brought vitality to the Anglo-Jewish press in the United States. Pro-Zionist newspapers and periodicals including the Jewish Advocate here in Boston, the

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan S. Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Gal, “The Zionist Influence on American Jewish Life,” 176.

<sup>8</sup> Woocher, *Sacred Survival*, 47.

Maccabbean, Jewish Frontier, Opinion, the Reconstructionist, and others set a new standard in Jewish journalism and elevated the whole tone of American Jewish communal life.

It would be easy to lengthen this list, and if we had more time before heading back to the future we might qualify certain items and offer telling examples of others. But enough has been said to establish the proposition that Zionism did make a difference in American Jewish life. Indeed, its impact was broad, substantial, and also in many ways distinct from its impact on Jewish life in Europe.

By all rights, Zionism should have declared victory and disappeared with the creation of the State of Israel. Just as the Women's Suffrage Movement ended successfully with the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1920, so we might have expected that Zionism would end, successfully, with the declaration of statehood in 1948. This is not the place for a full-scale analysis of why Zionism did not disappear as expected (perhaps in any case the question is foolish, given that traditional Jews still pray every Shabbat for the wellbeing of the exilarch and the heads of the yeshivot in Babylonia). I would nevertheless like to highlight here two reasons why Zionism continued to be relevant for American Jews, for in many ways they put into perspective our contemporary predicament.

First, Zionism continued, because the goal of creating a "model state" in Eretz Yisrael continued to inspire American Jews. Remember, that the Zion of the American Jewish imagination was never just a homeland. It was to be a utopian extension of the American dream, a Jewish refuge where freedom, liberty and social justice would reign supreme, an "outpost of democracy" that American Jews could legitimately, proudly, and patriotically champion. The creation of this "model state" endowed American Jews with a sacred "mission" that both linked them to other Jews and infused their own personal lives with meaning – the lofty satisfaction that comes from pursuing work of transcendent importance. "Our aim is the Kingdom of Heaven," Louis Brandeis once exclaimed, and the declaration reveals much about the kind of Zion that he and his fellow missionaries envisaged – nothing less than a heaven-on-earth.<sup>9</sup> American Zionists understood that 1948 marked only the beginning of this process -- the athalta degeula, so to speak –and they looked to post-1948 Zionism to continue the task. They kept Zionism alive during the post-State era because, to their mind, Zionism still had a great mission left to accomplish: the new state had yet to be transformed into a model state. For years, many American Jews continued to link Zionism to the goal of building a Jewish "model state." Israel, they believed, would extend the American dream outward and elevate the status of Jews around the world.

Zionism also remained relevant for post-1948 American Jews because, following Ahad Ha-am, they believed that the creation of a Jewish State in the Land of Israel would go far to revitalize Judaism here in America. Henrietta Szold was explicit in this regards from her earliest days as a Zionist: "I am more than ever convinced," she wrote following her visit

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<sup>9</sup> Allon Gal, "The Mission Motif in American Zionism (1898-1948)," *American Jewish History* 75 (June 1986), 370; Jonathan D. Sarna, "Zion in the Mind's Eye of American Jews," in Allon Gal (ed.) *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 58.

to Palestine in 1909, “that if not Zionism, then nothing – then extinction for the Jew.”<sup>10</sup> Precisely because Zionism in her view held the key to American Jewish renewal, she argued that Jews in America “need Zionism as much as those Jews do who need a physical home.”<sup>11</sup> Her longtime friend, and a distinguished member of this body, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, made precisely this point, following the establishment of the State of Israel, in his tract entitled *A New Zionism* (1955, 1959). Defining Zionism as “the remaking of the Jewish People through the remaking of its land,” he argued that the New Zionism needed, among other things, “to develop in the Diaspora, to the maximum degree, the creative potentialities of Jewish life, culture and religion.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, Zionism remained important because it provided the catalyst for the ongoing transformation, revitalization, (Kaplan would have said “Reconstruction”) of American Jewish life. His “New Zionism” was in many ways diaspora-centered.

Today, as we contemplate the future of Zionism, neither of these great goals from the past seems fully realistic to contemporary Jews. Few among us still believe that we have it in our power to create a Jewish “model state” in the Middle East. We have by and large come to terms with Israel as a real state, not an Altneuland-style utopia. Even as we may seek to effect changes in some of its policies, we understand that it is a democracy much like our own here in the United States, with many positive features and also considerable room for improvement. Similarly, I do not think that most of us today look to Israel to solve our diaspora-centered problems and to revitalize us. The future of the American Jew — the question of American Jewish continuity—is going to be decided here, by our leaders and by our laity. Israel does play and must continue to play an important role in our Jewish lives, and we know that it profoundly impacts, and even transforms, many an American Jew who encounters the land at firsthand. But Israel has been a state for almost fifty years, and I think that most of us realize that it is not the cure-all for world Jewish problems that some had hoped for. It offers some solutions for some problems, but others prove stubbornly intractable, testimony to the fact that there are no easy answers in Jewish life, no panaceas.

What then of the future of diaspora Zionism? At least three large-scale changes promise to transform diaspora Zionist life in the decades ahead. All three reflect changes brought on by the establishment of the State of Israel, and all three have special relevance to Jews living here in the United States.

1. In the next century, Israel seems poised to overtake the United States as the largest Jewish community in the world. The current American Jewish Year Book lists 5.6 million American Jews and 4.4 million Jews in Israel (p.461). These numbers are necessarily inexact, but when one considers the high immigration and birthrate in Israel and then the impact of growing immigration restriction and the low Jewish birthrate in the United States, Israel’s ascension (barring a catastrophe) seems almost inevitable. From an Israeli point of view this will mark the ultimate triumph of Zionism: the first time since the days of the *Tanach* that Israel will truly be the single largest population

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<sup>10</sup> Marvin Lowenthal, *Henrietta Szold: Life and Letters* (New York: Viking Press, 1942), 67.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Baila Round Shargel, *Lost Love: The Untold Story of Henrietta Szold* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 327.

<sup>12</sup> Mordecai Kaplan, *A New Zionism* (New York: Herzl Press & Reconstructionist Press, 1959), 149,187.

center of world Jewry. For American Jews, though, the impact of downward mobility, of moving from being the greatest Jewish community in the world to being only second best, may well prove sobering. How will this change affect the self-image of American Jews? How will it transform our fundraising? Our relationship to Israel? Our sense of responsibility for klal yisrael? Already, American Jewry seems to me mired in a crisis of confidence concerning itself and its future. How are we going to guide the community once this additional trauma strikes?

2. Second, the diaspora, in the next century, is likely to be a lonelier place for Jews. We may still consider ourselves an 'am 'olam, a people spread from one end of the world even unto the other, but the combined forces of persecution and (lehavdil) Zionism, have redrawn the map of world Jewry. The diaspora has shrunk by more than forty percent since 1939, and Jews in the diaspora are more concentrated than ever before. Ninety-three percent of the diaspora Jewish population is confined to just ten countries today. A mere thirty-seven diaspora countries can boast communities of 5000 Jews or more.<sup>13</sup> Most of the 200 or so countries of the world, including several where Jews had lived for millennia (Iraq, Syria, Ethiopia) are now completely barren of Jews or show tiny communities that are unsustainable. Indeed, huge areas of the world show no Jewish presence whatsoever. There is, to be sure, a silver lining in this data: the vast majority of diaspora Jews, as Sergio DellaPergola has shown, have moved to “economically affluent, politically stable and socially attractive environments” over the past fifty years.<sup>14</sup> They have abandoned underdeveloped countries (like Yemen), and unstable, dangerous countries (like Bosnia) and now live in the world’s most economically advanced countries (like America and France). Yet this benefit comes at a price. Where most of the world’s great religions – Christianity, Islam and Eastern religions – are today expanding, Judaism, alas, is contracting. Where other peoples are preaching the gospel of globalism and spreading their diasporas north, south, east and west, we Jews who invented the very concept of a diaspora are reducing our exposure to the larger world and practicing consolidation. Is it possible – I say this tentatively, I realize that it is a great heresy – but is it possible that Zionism has succeeded too well over the past fifty years? During diaspora Zionism’s next century, do we perhaps need to recalibrate the balance between “diaspora” and “Zionism,” emphasizing the former a bit more, and the latter a bit less? Should we, in the years ahead, take upon ourselves the mission of strengthening Jewish life in the diaspora, beginning right here in the United States?
3. This mention of “mission” points, finally, to the third great change that is affecting contemporary Jewish life, and that is the demise of the great Jewish causes that energized and invigorated world Jewry during the past half-century. Zionism was the greatest of these causes, and unquestionably our greatest achievement as a people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but Zionism, as we have seen, no longer has the capacity to inspire our younger generation. The efforts to free persecuted Jews suffering in the Soviet Union, in Arab lands, in Ethiopia, were similarly crowned with success, and as a result these effective missions have also come to an end. Today, for the first time in historical memory, no

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<sup>13</sup> *American Jewish Year Book* 96 (1996), 459-462; Sergio DellaPergola, “Changing Cores and Peripheries: Fifty Years in Socio-Demographic Perspective,” *Terms of Survival: The Jewish World Since 1945*, ed. Robert S. Wistrich (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 13-43.

<sup>14</sup> DellaPergola, “Changing Cores and Peripheries,” 36.

large community of persecuted Jews exists anywhere in the world – except, as one among you observed, the community of Conservative and Reform Jews in Israel. There are, to be sure, no shortage of important secular causes that Jews can embrace – social justice, environmentalism, animal rights, and the like -- and these are all significant causes, each with a sound basis in our tradition. But these are not, ultimately, Jewish causes, in the way that Zionism and the Soviet Jewry movement certainly were. Diaspora Jews today are poorer for not having a well-defined, elevating mission to inspire us. All of us feel this void, especially in this centenary year when we remember the energy and commitment that Zionism was once able to command, and we miss that.

Simon Rawidowicz, the great twentieth-century Zionist thinker who spent his last years at Brandeis University seems to me to have anticipated in some respects the situation in which we find ourselves. A voice in the wilderness, he spoke out as early as the 1920s on behalf of a model of Jewish life that he described as “an ellipse with two foci: the Land of Israel and the Diaspora of Israel” – *Bavel Verushalayim*, Babylon and Jerusalem. Setting himself apart from those who viewed Israel as “center” and the diaspora as “periphery,” he insisted that the Jewish people in the State of Israel and in the diaspora together constituted the concept and the reality called “the People of Israel.” “What is important,” he insisted, “is the independent spontaneous creativity of each center of Jewish life. . . Each community must strive to create a Jewish life. . . as if it alone were responsible for the entire existence of Israel.” Later, he knew, history would come and say “that no community alone created the whole, but that all created it together.”<sup>15</sup>

Rawidowicz penned these words when 94% of Jewry lived in the diaspora, but prophetically, he insisted that his words would “apply equally when that percentage will be 50 or 40.” No matter what their percentage, he concluded, diaspora Jews “must be responsible for their [own] life and creativity.”<sup>16</sup>

Today, as we contemplate the future of diaspora Zionism, Rawidowicz’s vision takes on new appeal. Notwithstanding Israel’s incipient status as the most populous Jewish community in the world, and notwithstanding the concomitant diminution in the size and significance of diaspora Jewry, our task, our mission, in the years ahead is to create a vibrant, creative Jewish life here in America, and elsewhere in the diaspora as well. We must strive to forge the greatest diaspora Jewish community that ever was. We must act as if “the entire existence and creativity of [klal] Israel” is dependent upon us. Just as twentieth-century American Jewry was reinvigorated by our efforts to revitalize Zion, so in the years ahead I believe that Zion will be reinvigorated by our efforts to revitalize American Jewry. “The people of Israel,” Rawidowicz never tired of reminding us, consists of “the State of Israel plus the Diaspora of Israel.”<sup>17</sup> During Diaspora Zionism’s second century, let us strive to strengthen both at once.

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<sup>15</sup> Simon Rawidowicz, *Israel: The Ever-Dying People*, ed. Benjamin C.I.Ravid, (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986), 147-161.

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 153.