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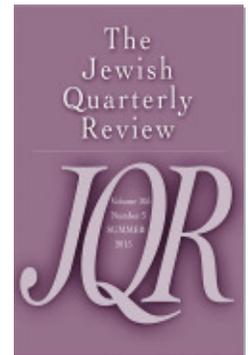
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Nationalism without a Nation? On the Invisibility of American Jewish Politics

JAMES LOEFFLER

You are coming together, you Jews, after many long years . . . You were all together on the night of the Exodus from Egypt. You were all together at Mount Sinai and the last time you were together was on the walls of Jerusalem fighting the enemy. And now, after thousands of years, you are again coming together, you Jews, in a land of which our ancestors had never heard and knew nothing.

—Sholem Asch, “Know Thyself!” (1918)¹

Jewish nationalism in the United States is a shamefaced, apologetic dualism . . . There is no such thing as separate nationalisms reserved for the Polish, the Rumanian, the Russian Jews from which the American Jews can claim exemption . . . Either there is one Jewish people or there is none.

—Joseph Tenenbaum, *Peace for the Jews* (1945)²

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1. Sholem Asch, “Derkent aykh! Tsum ershtn idishen kongres,” *Forverta*, December 15, 1918, 1, quoted in Jonathan Frankel, “The Jewish Socialists and the American Jewish Congress Movement,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 16 (1976): 319.

2. Joseph Tenenbaum, *Peace for the Jews* (New York, 1945), 11–12, 16.

Nationalism is a dirty word in the United States.

—Minxin Pei, “The Paradoxes of American Nationalism” (2003)³

“FOR THE FIRST TIME in Jewish history, for the first time at a major Jewish assembly there came a declaration that we Jews are a nation, very simply a nation.”⁴ These words refer not to the First Zionist Congress in 1897, nor to the Declaration of the State of Israel in 1948. Instead, they hail from a long-forgotten event, the first American Jewish Congress in Philadelphia in 1918. After a four-year campaign, 400 political delegates elected by over 320,000 American Jews convened as a Jewish national assembly. Twenty-five years later, at the height of the Second World War, the scene repeated itself. Five hundred delegates representing some 2,250,000 Jews formed a parliamentary-style political body known as the American Jewish Conference. Observing the events in 1943, the Labor Zionist leader Judah Pilch predicted that the conference marked the beginning of a new form of “Jewish self-government” in America: This “National Jewish Community Council . . . will be the American version of the Palestinian *Vaad Leumi* and will be authorized to speak and act in the name of American Jewry.” Building their own national “Kehillah,” Pilch argued, would determine once and for all “the attitude of American Jews toward the idea of Jewish nationalism and its by-product—Zionism.”⁵

What, precisely, was the American Jewish stance on Jewish nationalism before 1948? Today, we would typically answer that question by reference to Jewish statehood in Palestine. In our common parlance, Zionism, then and now, simply denotes political identification with the State of Israel. Yet by that dubious standard, half of the American population might qualify as Jewish nationalists. Against this conventional wisdom, I wish to propose two revisionist claims. First, historically speaking, American Jewish nationalism is not merely coterminous with Zionism. Second, American Jewish political thought, despite assumptions to the contrary, contains surprisingly robust expressions of nationalism centered on Jewish political identity *within* American society.

Once upon a time, to be a Zionist meant first and foremost to believe in the reality of the Jewish nation. Zionists shared this conviction, despite

3. Minxin Pei, “The Paradoxes of American Nationalism,” *Foreign Policy* 136 (2003): 30.

4. Yoel Entin, “Der yidisher kongres,” *Varbayt*, December 21, 1918, quoted in Frankel, “Jewish Socialists,” 320.

5. Judah Pilch, “By-Products of the Conference,” *New Palestine* 33.16 (July 16, 1943): 7–9.

their ideological differences, with the other political tributaries feeding into the larger stream of Jewish nationalism. While support for the Jewish national project in Palestine was the focal point of Zionist ideology, it was by no means the only way Jews practiced their Zionist politics. Elsewhere in the pre–World War II Jewish world, they pursued an array of activities—political campaigns for diaspora national minority rights, legal activism in the international arena, Hebraist cultural projects, and social and philanthropic movements—that expressed their identification with the Jewish nation. Most elementary of all, they adopted the tropes of nationhood in their languages of self-description. That is, they called themselves a nation.⁶

American Jews, by contrast, exhibited a very different pattern. Both in World War I and World War II, American Jewish nationalists acted much like Zionists elsewhere. They mobilized on behalf of Zion. They campaigned for international recognition of Jewish nationhood. They demanded national minority rights for Jews in Eastern Europe. They railed against “assimilationists” in the Jewish fold. But they differed in one crucial respect. When it came to publicly professing their nationhood, they balked. Twice American Jewish nationalists flirted vigorously with the idea of launching a permanent Jewish national “parliament.” Each time, however, they ultimately voted not to do so. Even as they loudly preached Jewish nationalist politics abroad, American Jews fell conspicuously silent about their own political identity at home. In fact, when it came to describing themselves within the American context, these nationalists assiduously avoided all mention of the words “nation” or “national.” In doing so, they produced the strange contradiction at the heart of American Jewish politics: the obvious presence of Jewish nationalism in America coupled with the putative absence of a Jewish nation.

Why did American Jews mobilize so intensively on behalf of a Jewish nation abroad before 1948 yet refuse to self-identify as part of a Jewish nation at home? Was the ambivalent approach to nationalist self-description the result of fears about external charges of dual loyalty in American society? Or did it have to do with the internal competition with Jewish antinationalists for control of the Jewish street? How did the fractious fights about Zionism in the American Jewish community before

6. This is not to discount the recent work on the fluidity of Jewish political nomenclature in pre–World War II Europe. See David Myers, *The Past and Future of the Jewish Nation* (Bloomington, Ind., forthcoming); Noam Pianko, *Jewish Peoplehood* (New Brunswick, N.J., forthcoming); and Joshua Shanes, *Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish Identity in Habsburg Galicia* (Cambridge, 2012).

and during World War II yield so easily to a strong consensual support for the State of Israel immediately afterward? To answer these questions requires that we undertake a reexamination of these forgotten earlier episodes of American Jewish nationalism.

Strangely enough, given the importance of Zionism and Israel in American Jewish political life, these prime nationalist moments have long languished in obscurity. In the grand narratives of American Jewish history, historians have relegated the American Jewish Congress movement and American Jewish Conference to the footnotes. In her recent survey *The Jews of the United States*, for instance, Hasia Diner dismisses both the Congress and Conference phenomena as temporary responses to international crisis or intramural communal politics. In her estimation, they simply do not rise to the level of politically significant forms of Jewish nationalism.⁷ Nor do they figure in the other major accounts provided by Jonathan Sarna in his *American Judaism* or the team of historians responsible for the *Cambridge Companion to American Judaism*.⁸ Most extreme, Yehuda Bauer goes so far as to explicitly deny the existence of these political institutions.⁹

These omissions are not coincidental. They stem from the imprint of teleology on the writing of modern Jewish political history. Looking backward from the post-1948 era, scholars continually define Jewish nationalism through the narrow measure of the Zionist quest for state sovereignty. As a result, they take support for the project of statehood in Palestine to be the prime metric with which to judge the presence and character of Jewish nationalism in America. In other words, historians have continued to define American Jewish nationalism by its attitudes toward the political object—Zion—rather than the political subject—Jewish collective identity in the United States.

7. Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States* (Berkeley, Calif., 2004), 197–99. See also Howard M. Sachar, *A History of the Jews in America* (New York, 1992), 266, 273. In her important study on “Jewish self-governance” in America, Diner does not even bother to list either incident in a survey of attempts at political organization. Hasia Diner, “Jewish Self-Governance, American Style,” *American Jewish History* 81.3/4 (1994): 277–95.

8. Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven, Conn., 2004); D. E. Kaplan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism* (Cambridge, 2005).

9. “American Jewry was never a ‘community,’” writes Bauer, “it had, and has, no central organs, democratically or otherwise elected, and it was, and is, rent by the most wide-ranging differences on every possible issue . . . there was not even a national Jewry [in the United States].” Yehuda Bauer, *Out of the Ashes: The Impact of American Jews on Post-Holocaust European Jewry* (Oxford, 1989), xiii–xiv.

Over many decades, this assumption has led to a conventional account of American Jewish nationalism as a story of “Zion without Zionism” or “long-distance nationalism.”¹⁰ Only recently has this pattern begun to change, thanks in part to the recovery of the diverse array of Jewish nationalist ideologies associated with thinkers such as Israel Friedlander, Hans Kohn, Mordecai Kaplan, and Simon Rawidowicz. Scholars such as Arthur Goren, David Myers, and Noam Pianko have sought to decouple nation and state in tracing the intellectual history of American Jewish political thought, including Zionism.¹¹ However, these case studies of intellectual elites have yet to link the history of ideas to actual nationalist episodes that involved large-scale mass mobilization.¹² Hence the revisionist current of scholarship has not coalesced into a full counternarrative of American Jewish politics.

Another common strategy for explaining away the unusual character of Jewish nationalism in America has been to emphasize American political exceptionalism. True Jewish nationalism never developed in the United States, this line of argument runs, because American political culture never tolerated any forms of ethnic nationalism. Owing to its unique sociopolitical character as an immigrant society and liberal republic, American civic republicanism rejected any concept of ethnic nationalism beyond the merely symbolic realm of cultural nationalism. In contrast to the multiethnic empires of East Central Europe, where Jewish nationalist movements of all stripes flourished, the United States produced a softer Jewish strain of liberalism that favored ethnic solidarity over nationalist political mobilization, voluntary communal affiliation rather than formal collectivist politics, and Anglo-American communal pragmatism in place of European Romantic idealism. Most critically, given the key political significance of race in American society, religion emerged as the sole group category for asserting Jewish public identity. “If Polish Jewish

10. Steven Rosenthal, “Long-Distance Nationalism: American Jews, Zionism, and Israel,” in *Cambridge Companion*, 209–24.

11. See, for instance, Arthur Goren, *The Politics and Public Culture of American Jews* (New York, 1999); David Myers, *Between Arab and Jew: The Lost Voice of Simon Rawidowicz* (Waltham, Mass., 2008); James Loeffler, “Between Zionism and Liberalism: Oscar Janowsky and Diaspora Nationalism in America,” *AJS Review* 34.2 (2010): 289–308; and Noam Pianko, *Zionism and the Roads Not Taken: Rawidowicz, Kaplan, Kohn* (Bloomington, Ind., 2010).

12. Important exceptions to this trend are the recent works focused on the European and Palestinian contexts, such as Dimitry Shumsky, “Tzionut u-medinat ha-le’um: Ha’arakah me-ḥadash,” *Tzion* 77.2 (2012): 223–54; Simon Rabinovitch, *Jewish Rights, National Rites: Nationalism and Autonomy in Late Imperial and Revolutionary Russia* (Stanford, Calif., 2014); and Shanes, *Diaspora Nationalism*.

politics was hard, in America it was soft,” writes the historian Ezra Mendelsohn in his comparative survey of modern Jewish politics, adding, “This is another way of saying that Polish Jewish politics was East European, and American Jewish politics was American. ‘As the gentiles go, so go the Jews.’”¹³

There are two problems with this explanation of American Jewish nationalism. The first is that we no longer view American politics as soft. In recent years, American historians have identified the harder nationalist underbelly of American political life. Focusing particular attention on the early twentieth century, they have highlighted the strong currents of American ethnic and racial nationalism encoded in the ostensibly universalist rhetoric of civic patriotism. Accordingly, the putative absence of ethnoracial nationalism in American life merely disguises its robust presence.¹⁴ So too have historians problematized the enduring cult of American Jewish exceptionalism. They have challenged the stock historiographical trope of the United States as an intrinsically “post-emancipation” society blissfully free of Jewish political dramas and ideological anti-Semitism.¹⁵

Second, historians have begun to rethink our methodological approach to the study of nationalism more generally. A nuanced understanding of the different shades and styles of nationalist politics, particularly with respect to Eastern Europe, has of late emerged. Rather than treat nationalism as a primal force that simply manifests itself in political movements seeking to build nations or acquire states, historians and sociologists increasingly frame nationalism as a “protean and polymorphous” set of practices that include various kinds of transnational political mobilization, self-identification, and nonstatist and autonomist ideologies. They also understand nationalism to be historically marked by frequent gaps between emotionalist discourse and political strategies. These new perspectives allow us to concern ourselves, in the words of Rogers Brubaker, “not with how much nationalism there is but with what kind, not with

13. Ezra Mendelsohn, *On Modern Jewish Politics* (Oxford, 1999), 91.

14. See, for instance, Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J., 2001); Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York, 2013); and Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

15. Tony Michels, “‘Is America ‘Different?’ A Critique of American Jewish Exceptionalism,” *American Jewish History* 96.3 (2011): 201–24.

the strength but with the characteristic structure and style of nationalist politics."¹⁶

In my view, this historical reconceptualization of nationalism offers us a key with which to unlock the puzzle of American Jewish politics. To do so, we need to revisit these two turning points at which American Jewish nationalism flashed up in its most overt form, generating a public conversation about group identity and representational politics. The American Jewish Congress represented the first major effort to turn American Jews into an overtly nationalist political body; the American Jewish Conference was the second and final such attempt. On the surface, both failed as political enterprises. Yet, as I will argue, it was precisely the failure of American Jewish nationhood as a political project that actually led to the success of American Jewish nationalism, allowing it to flourish unimpeded in the bosom of twentieth-century American liberalism.

It is a persistent cliché that Jewish freedom in American society from the outset was axiomatic, not conditional. According to this line of reasoning, the American republic was born uniquely free and open to its Jewish minority. The only potential barrier to full civic inclusion was religion. Even here, it is often said, Jews comfortably pointed to the First Amendment in advancing claims to religious liberty. While their European cousins struggled throughout the nineteenth century for political emancipation, the Jews of America enjoyed freedom by right rather than sufferance. Instead of grudging European state policies that gradually relieved Jews of a group of premodern corporate privileges and legal disabilities, American Jews entered a democratic polity as individuals equal in the eyes of the law.

In truth, however, the modern American incarnation of liberalism provided Jews with its own distinct variant on the classic offer of modern individual citizenship in exchange for the surrender of premodern Jewish communal autonomy. To paraphrase Jacob Katz, the Jews did not so much integrate into the American people as into a certain segment of it: the white racial majority. Embracing the American racial paradigm of a society divided between two races, black and white, Jews muted their cultural difference. At the tail end of the nineteenth century, anxieties about political anti-Semitism and mass migration arose just as the Ameri-

16. Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge, 1996), 10. See also Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

can color line hardened into a new, post-Reconstruction mold. Prior to that moment, as Eric Goldstein has shown, American Jews actually used the language of race in the earlier nineteenth century to deemphasize any implication of foreign nationhood. Now, talk of Jews as a race became unacceptable. In the early twentieth century, American Jews began to fashion a new rhetoric of group identity as a religious and cultural minority. Neologisms such as ethnicity, community, and peoplehood began to appear.¹⁷ The price of whiteness was a loss of thicker, more distinctively marked Jewish group identity in America.¹⁸ The reward was a freedom to act politically on Jewish issues without any perception that Jews were an irredentist nationality or a racial other as was the case in so much of Europe.

The rise of Jewish nationalist politics in twentieth-century America was directly predicated on its invisibility. That hiddenness was not natural or inevitable. It was deliberately chosen and consciously created by the very Jewish political factions most invested in the dual success of Jewish nationalism and American liberalism. Throughout the twentieth century, the very lack of a distinctive racial or national identity for American Jews (as opposed to, say, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, or Japanese Americans) made it easier to embrace American civic identity while simultaneously espousing a strong nationalist identification with Zionism and the State of Israel. We are accustomed to thinking of American Zionism as a story of Jews reconfiguring Zionism to make it acceptable for American political culture. But in truth, we might just as easily flip this equation around. Zionism helped make America safer for Jewish politics. It allowed American Jews to become more, not less, identified with American civic identity, after 1948. For, by rallying around the flag of

17. Lila Corwin-Berman, *Speaking of Jews: Rabbis, Intellectuals, and the Creation of an American Public Identity* (Berkeley, Calif., 2009); Noam Pianko, "Jewish Peoplehood and the Nationalist Paradigm in American Jewish Culture," in *Thinking Jewish Culture in America*, ed. K. Koltun-Fromm (Lexington, Ky., 2013), 15–29.

18. Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race and American Identity* (Princeton, N.J., 2008). Mention should be made, however, of Andrew Heinze's trenchant critique of the idea of Jewish racial mobility. Heinze reminds us that the early twentieth-century changes in Jewish self-fashioning were not a decisive turning point in Jewish racial integration because, from the colonial period onward, Jews were consistently classified as white in the American legal imagination. The immigrant-era embrace of whiteness is thus better understood as a self-conscious moment of rhetorical response to proximate political anxieties. Andrew Heinze, "Is It 'Cos I's Black?" *Jews and the Whiteness Problem* (David W. Belin Lecture in American Jewish Affairs, University of Michigan; Ann Arbor, Mich., 2007).

Zion, American Jews effectively outsourced their Jewish nationhood to the State of Israel. So effective was that effort that it remains opaque to us today.

Writer Peter Beinart has argued that the intensification of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict after 1967 drove a wedge between Zionism and liberalism among American Jews. Beinart claims that Israeli state policies (and reflexive American Jewish communal leadership support for them) have alienated Jewish youth and others. In response, the social scientists Len Saxe and Theodore Sasson have shown that on net, the Jewish relationship to Israel has not weakened as much as changed. American Jews have shifted from a pattern of collective identification and public institutional participation in support of Israel to a private form of emotional tourism and less formal engagement.¹⁹ What is missing from both sides of this debate, however, is a historical perspective on the interrelationship between American Jewish politics and American Jewish collective identity. Both contemporary defenders and critics of Zionism assume Israel to be the sole locus of Jewish nationalism. They fail to recognize that nationalism is not simply a yes/no proposition regarding an external reality. It is also a set of choices regarding self-definition in one's native political habitat. Hence it is not the diminution of Jewish political attachment to Israel or the growth of exclusionary Jewish nationalism in Israel with which we ought to concern ourselves but rather the phenomenon of the vanishing Jewish nation in the United States. In order to understand the past fortunes and future prospects for American Jewish nationalism, we first need to retrace how Jewish nationhood became visible and then invisible in American life. That story begins a century ago, during a moment of crisis and opportunity generated by the outbreak of World War I.

THE AMERICAN JEWISH CONGRESS
MOVEMENT: FAILURE BY DESIGN?

Nearly four decades ago, Jonathan Frankel termed the American Jewish Congress movement "the most remarkable" incident in American Jewish

19. Peter Beinart, *The Crisis of Zionism* (New York, 2012); Leonard Saxe and Theodore Sasson, "Wrong Numbers," <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/34533/wrong-numbers> (May 28, 2010). See also the academic debate as represented by Theodore Sasson, *The New American Zionism* (New York, 2013); Theodore Sasson, Benjamin Phillips, Charles Kadushin, and Leonard Saxe, *Still Connected: American Jewish Attitudes about Israel* (Waltham, Mass., 2010); and Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, *Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel*, Jewish Identity Project of Reboot, 2007: <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=326>.

history. “No other episode,” he concluded in his magisterial account, “has generated such profound divisions, such fierce debate, such prolonged political maneuvering, such relentless in-fighting—and in the end, so dramatic and . . . surprising a degree of unity.”²⁰ The unity to which Frankel alluded was exemplified by the unprecedented mass elections that took place in the summer of 1917. After three years of preparations and delicate, protracted negotiations, the full range of Jewish political elements participated: general Zionists, Labor Zionists, religious Zionists, Diaspora Nationalists, antinationalist liberals, Marxist socialists, religious groups, and labor unions. When the Congress convened in 1918, by some estimates it represented 90 percent of American Jews.

How did such a diverse, ideologically fractious range of Jewish groups come together at all? Certainly the outbreak of World War I generated a shared sense of external crisis and collective responsibility among American Jews, impelling political unity in order to coordinate philanthropic and diplomatic efforts on behalf of European Jewry. Similar reasons had resulted in earlier attempts to organize American Jewry, including the formation of the American Jewish Committee in 1906.²¹ But a more precise answer lies in the details of the truce worked out between the two main factions at the heart of the dramatic conflict. At its root, the episode reflected a fight over the meaning of nationalism in American Jewish life.

From autumn 1914 onward, a cluster of Jewish nationalist groups, chiefly comprising the Federation of American Zionists, Poale Zion, and some Jewish non-Zionist socialists, began to agitate for a unified political organization to address the international crisis in the Jewish world.²² By the spring of 1915, demands had crystallized into a call for a Jewish congress authorized “to represent the Jewish people, to speak in its name, to conduct its politics, to organize it, to raise it up, to liberate and restructure its entire life, [something that] cannot be done by self-appointed groups of *Shtadlanim*, by party, by faction or an organization but only by the people organized as such, working through its democratically elected representatives and through its own agencies and institutions

20. Frankel, “Jewish Socialists,” 203–4.

21. In fact, the American Jewish Committee itself was created to preempt an attempt by Jewish nationalists to create a “democratically elected Jewish congress.” Daniel Kotzin, *Judah L. Magnes: An American Jewish Nonconformist* (Syracuse, N.Y., 2010), 101. See also Matthew Silver, *Louis Marshall and the Rise of Jewish Ethnicity in America: A Biography* (Syracuse, N.Y., 2013), 109–24.

22. For a concise overview of the formation of the Congress, see Lawton Kessler, Aaron Alperin, and Jack Diamond, “American Jews and the Paris Peace Conference,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science* 2/3 (1948): 222–34.

controlled by the people."²³ Over the next year, a vigorous debate erupted over the political character and jurisdiction of the Congress. The two factions consisted of the nationalists, led primarily by Louis Brandeis, Nahum Syrkin, and Stephen S. Wise, and the antinationalists clustered around the leadership of the American Jewish Committee. Brandeis's group sought a permanent, democratic, and national organization modeled along the lines of the New York Kehillah, a local overarching communal federation. Termed by some a future "national parliament" for American Jews, this new Jewish Congress would represent American Jews in all matters regarding world Jewry. It would press claims before the American government and other European powers on behalf of Jewish national aspirations in Palestine and Eastern Europe.

To the non-Zionist leaders such as Louis Marshall and Jacob Schiff, the Congress initiative represented a transparent attempt to launch nationalist autonomy for the Jewish population in American society. While sympathetic to the appeals to Jewish unity in the face of the European crisis, they were wary of partnering with Zionists and socialists. Even more threatening, however, was the prospect of a permanent political organization for American Jewry. Such a move, declared Schiff, was tantamount to "the establishment of a new government, a government for the Jews by which the Jews are to be bound. This is something new in Jewry since the dissolution of the Jewish nation two thousand years ago."²⁴ They feared that global Jewish nationhood would endanger the status of Jews in the United States.²⁵ As Matthew Silver writes, "The AJC was a political organization masterminded by Jews who insisted that Jews had no political interests in America, or anywhere else."²⁶

After two years of difficult behind-the-scenes negotiations and heated public rallies, the two factions reached an agreement in 1916. The compromise solution was to convene the Congress as a temporary ad hoc organization for the duration of the wartime emergency rather than as a permanent political institution. Democratic elections were to be held for 75 percent of its seats, with the other quarter reserved for delegates nominated by Jewish organizations. This was the price Jewish nationalists paid to ensure the participation of the antinationalist liberals and hence

23. Quoted in Frankel, "Jewish Socialists," 207.

24. Quoted in Morris Frommer, "The American Jewish Congress: A History, 1914–1950" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1978), 72.

25. On Marshall, see Silver, *Louis Marshall*, and Victoria Saker Woeste, *Henry Ford's War on the Jews and the Legal Battle against Hate Speech* (Stanford, Calif., 2013).

26. Silver, *Louis Marshall*, 138.

achieve a truly representative, inclusive expression of American Jewish unity.²⁷ The deal allowed the nationalists to promote Jewish claims to Palestine and to champion Jewish national minority rights in Eastern Europe. But it also meant that they had no mandate to continue once hostilities formally ended. In fact, the Congress convened only twice. After the 1917 elections, an inaugural session was held in the summer of 1918 in Philadelphia. Then, after dispatching an official American Jewish delegation to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, the group formally dissolved itself at a closing session held in 1920 in Philadelphia. The subsequent attempt to revive it afterward led only to a narrow political organization, not, despite the retention of the name, a broad movement. Hence despite a moment of mass political mobilization, in the end American Jewish nationalists did not create a permanent Jewish national assembly in the United States.

Over the generations, historians have discussed the American Jewish Congress movement nearly exclusively in terms of its dealings at the Paris Peace Conference. There, just as in the preceding few years in America, the antinationalist liberals, led by Cyrus Adler and Louis Marshall, squared off against Stephen S. Wise, Judge Julian Mack, and their cohort of nationalists, who aligned themselves with an East European nationalist group, the Comité des Délégations Juives (predecessor to the World Jewish Congress). According to most accounts, a compromise was achieved at Paris. The nationalists successively guided their antinationalist peers into acceptance of the Balfour Declaration. They achieved a measure of national rights for East European Jewry, but not true national autonomy or minority rights (in spite of perceptions to the contrary).²⁸ But what is completely ignored is that all of this diplomatic activity abroad was intimately connected to the very live questions of American Jewish national identity and political self-government at home. For behind the debates and negotiations over what rights American Jews should demand for their brethren abroad loomed the question: How should they constitute themselves at home in the United States?

27. Melvin Urofsky, *A Voice That Spoke for Justice: The Life and Times of Stephen S. Wise* (Albany, N.Y., 1982), 127–33.

28. On precisely what was achieved and lost at Paris in terms of national minority rights, see Oscar Janowsky, *The Jews and Minority Rights, 1898–1919* (New York, 1933), 385–90; Bernard G. Richards and Solomon Zeitlin, “Correspondence: Jewish National Minority Rights,” *JQR* 36.1 (1945): 89–103; Urofsky, *A Voice That Spoke*, 127–33; Carole Fink, *Defending the Rights of Others: The Great Powers, the Jews, and International Minority Protection, 1878–1958* (Cambridge, 2004), 133–70; Jonathan Frankel, “Jewish Socialists,” 324–25; and Kessler et al., “American Jews,” 237–42.

If we look at the debates leading up to the first session of the Congress in 1918, we find the nationalist groups strangely alternating between the strongest political rhetoric about global Jewish nationhood and a pattern of silence and quick compromise about the specific language as it applied to American Jews. The Russian-born Poale Zion leader Nahum Syrkin (1868–1924) is a good case in point. After decades in Europe spent working on behalf of Socialist Zionism, Syrkin arrived in the United States in 1907. He emerged as an early and vocal proponent of the Congress idea. In a 1915 Yiddish-language manifesto, “The Jewish Congress,” he called for the “Jewish nation” to build a national congress in the United States as “the cornerstone for a future world Jewish congress, a standing Jewish representation, which would manage and lead all Jewish national affairs.”²⁹ But though American Jewish self-representation was the cornerstone of a Jewish international self-governance, he made no mention at all of national rights or national autonomy for Jews in America. In fact, his only direct reference to the political demands for American Jews was in reference to free immigration. Syrkin declared it a political *sine qua non* alongside national autonomy in Eastern Europe and statehood in Palestine.³⁰

Again and again in subsequent years, Syrkin and other Socialist Zionists praised the “national Congress” as an overt instrument of “organized nationalism” against “organized assimilation” and the “absolutist, anti-national plutocracy.”³¹ At several key points in 1915 and 1916, however, they fairly readily agreed to the antinationalists’ demand that the issue of the self-definition of American Jews or their political structure be placed off limits to the Congress mandate. So too they acquiesced to a policy of avoiding language that might imply even a scintilla of national identity among American Jews. Thus the text of early draft resolutions was amended by consent to avoid any implication that “national rights” might apply to American Jews.³² Even this term was eventually altered to “group rights,” and then even further diluted.³³ Most strikingly, the word “national” does not appear in the proposed call for the Congress. Instead, the Congress employed the English term “Jewish people,” viewed as

29. Nahum Syrkin, *Der yiddisher kongres* (New York, 1915), 18.

30. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

31. Quoted in Frankel, “Jewish Socialists,” 282, 285. See also American Jewish Congress, *Preliminary Conference of the American Jewish Congress: Report of Proceedings, March 27 and 28, 1916, Philadelphia, PA* (New York, 1916), 21.

32. Frommer, *American Jewish Congress*, 86–87.

33. Frankel, “Jewish Socialists,” 284.

more neutral than “nation” or “nationality.”³⁴ This quietism enraged one prominent Zionist participant, David Ben-Gurion. In a 1917 article he denounced the “impotence and shame . . . [of] the Congress, which in its declaration to the Jewish people erased the word ‘nation.’”³⁵ Yet Ben-Gurion was in a distinct minority of opinion in his insistence that American Jews employ the language of nationhood.³⁶

This curious pattern of fiery rhetoric about Jewish nationhood abroad and near total silence about political identity at home was particularly evident in the leadership of Stephen S. Wise. After the abdication of Louis Brandeis due to his nomination to the Supreme Court, Wise emerged as the public face of the Congress movement. At the opening of the Congress’s first session in 1918, he gave a stirring address on the theme of “American Israel and Democracy.” There, he asserted, “Jewish self-determination is neither un-Jewish nor un-American.” For the next few years, Wise continued to invoke nationalist, even racial language to describe American Jews.³⁷ An outspoken Zionist, he led the effort to make the American Jewish Congress a permanent Jewish national entity. Yet Wise explicitly placed the United States out of bounds for any discussion of Jewish “national rights.”³⁸ Sensitive to the wartime political climate in the United States and charges of dual loyalty, he insisted on the lack of conflict in his identity and political commitments. “I do not believe in hyphenated Americanism,” he said in 1915, declaring himself an ardent proponent of “100% Americanism.”³⁹ Likewise, he stressed that his Jew-

34. Janowsky, *Jews and Minority Rights*, 181–82, 188. See also the forthcoming study of Noam Pianko, *Jewish Peoplehood*.

35. David Ben-Gurion, “Vos un vi azoy,” *Der yiddisher kempfer* 41(81), November 30, 1917.

36. To be sure, there were some Diaspora Nationalist and socialist leaders, most notably Chaim Zhitlovsky, who actively campaigned for national autonomy in the United States. But despite his popularity and visibility, there is little evidence that Zhitlovsky actually impacted the language or resolutions adopted.

37. For instance, in the fall of 1915, as the Congress movement battle raged, he wrote to a colleague: “I can see more and more clearly that the fight of tomorrow will not be over orthodoxy and reform but over a real and fundamental Jewishness expressed racially or if you please, nationally, and with milk-and-water emasculated Judaism which is the sad survival of the German Jewish Reformation.” Quoted in Urofsky, *A Voice That Spoke*, 377. See also Stephen S. Wise, *Challenging Years: The Autobiography of Stephen Wise* (New York, 1949), 207.

38. Frommer, *American Jewish Congress*, 86.

39. “I can be a loyal American and still insist that I am a Jew racially and related to all the Jews of the world,” Wise told a *New York Times* reporter in 1916.

ish ideological commitments couldn't possibly influence American electoral politics: "There will never be a Jewish-American vote save to keep an unworthy Jewish candidate out of public office."⁴⁰ This was quite a strange proposition, especially when compared to the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires at the time, where a Jewish electoral bloc was understood as the basic means of creating and deploying nationalist politics. Moreover, in the same breath that he denied the existence of a Jewish vote, Wise touted the authority and power of the Jewish population to regulate acceptable Jewish participation in American political life. This suggested that his vision of American Jewish politics rested on a careful balancing act between nationalism and liberalism.⁴¹

Similar tensions emerged in Wise's leadership at the second and final session of the American Jewish Congress in 1920. It was then that the question of whether to make it a permanent institution was formally resolved. In the run-up to the event, rising nativism led many Jewish leaders to advocate a cessation of formal political activities of any kind. Conversely, the issuance of the Minority Treaties promised a resolution of the international crisis of European Jewry. For their part, many American Zionists now focused their attentions on fulfilling the promise of the Balfour Declaration and other internal doctrinal conflicts.⁴² Beyond these larger factors, though, the direct collapse of the Congress in 1920 stemmed from a more specific reason. The American Jewish Committee leaders simply refused to allow further elections or an alteration of the standing procedural agreement about the temporary nature of the organization. Wise and the nationalist faction heatedly responded to the situation with fierce denunciations to the point of outright brawling. One of his colleagues shouted that Louis Marshall of the American Jewish Committee had "betrayed the Jewish race." Wise himself spoke defiantly of the need to reorganize a Jewish national congress. He denounced his antinationalist opponents as "un-democratic, un-American, un-Jewish" cowards: "To forebear from meeting as Jews to protect Jews from hurt

Robert Shapiro, *A Reform Rabbi in the Progressive Era: The Early Career of Stephen S. Wise* (New York, 1988), 348. See also Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 184–85.

40. Quoted in Shapiro, *Reform Rabbi*, 347. A pacifist before the war, Wise turned into a staunch militarist, even devoting a summer to working as a Navy shipbuilding factory in Stamford, Connecticut.

41. On the complicated rhetoric surrounding the idea of a "Jewish vote," see David Dalin, "Louis Marshall, the Jewish Vote, and the Republican Party," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 4 (1992): 55–84.

42. Urofsky, *Voice That Spoke*, 159–60.

and to guard the honor of the Jewish name, lest we be misunderstood, were moral surrender, even spiritual suicide."⁴³ A formalistic insistence on parliamentary procedure, he suggested, amounted to suppression of the Jewish democratic will.

At first glance, the gap between Wise's impassioned populist rhetoric and his somewhat slavish submission to parliamentary formalism in the context of a voluntaristic organization seems quite odd.⁴⁴ The truth, however, is that Wise's insistence on procedure was likely strategic. Kowtowing to the preexisting agreement that no permanent Jewish assembly be created served the purposes of Jewish nationalism just as much as it appeased antinationalist anxieties. For the dissolution of the American Jewish Congress movement afforded American Jewish nationalists a convenient means of reconciling their desire to assert Jewish nationalism with the aim of remaining safely within the bounds of American liberalism. Having already abandoned the idea of national autonomy even before the Congress began in earnest in 1915, they viewed their goal as that of projecting claims to Jewish legal recognition as a nation abroad in Europe and Palestine. Meanwhile, at home in America they remained an unmarked portion of the white polity.⁴⁵ That is, they sought no special recognition as formal political group inside the American state.

This same dynamic is even more transparent in another speech made at the final meeting in 1920, this one by the honorary president, Nathan Strauss. A longtime Zionist, he opened the proceedings by invoking the image of "a new American Sanhedrin . . . called together not by a King or an Emperor, but by the will and determination of the whole Jewish people of America." The choice of Sanhedrin to describe the American Jewish Congress was rich with irony. The French Sanhedrin, convened at the insistence of Napoleon a century earlier, had been charged with formally renouncing Jewish political nationhood. The French emperor demanded that the Jews dissolve their corporate national status in order to assimilate into the French polity as individuals. In fact, it was for this very reason that Nahum Syrkin had invoked the specter of the Sanhedrin in his 1915 manifesto for the Congress as a "humiliating moment in Jew-

43. *Proceedings of Adjourned Session of American Jewish Congress Including Report of Commission to Peace Conference and of Provisional Organization for Formation of American Jewish Congress* (Philadelphia, 1920), 33–34.

44. This emphasis on democratic principles and civil procedures within voluntary organizations was, however, common within Jewish *landmanshaftn*. See Daniel Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880–1939* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 6.

45. Frankel, "Jewish Socialists," 204.

ish history” in which the “Jewish assimilationist-bourgeoisie of Western Europe triumphed” over the Jewish nation. Strauss’s reference to the Sanhedrin in 1920, at the moment of the Congress’s dissolution, neatly encapsulates a simultaneous expression and abnegation of Jewish nationhood in the face of the demands of modern liberalism. It was thus the perfect image to sum up the end of this phase of the American Jewish Congress movement.⁴⁶

Here we confront the dualistic character of Jewish nationalism in America directly. The underlying dynamics of the nationalist camp suggest that it was not so much the end of international crisis or the collapse of political compromise with the antinationalists that ensured the demise of the Congress movement after World War I. To a certain extent, this outcome was inevitable. In spite of the prominent role of American Zionists such as Horace Kallen, Mordecai Kaplan, and Judah Magnes in the development of cultural pluralism, there is little evidence that these American Jewish nationalists were truly interested in testing the political boundaries of American liberalism when it came to group rights or national self-determination.⁴⁷ This is an important distinction that is often forgotten in contemporary treatments of their work. In the 1910s and 1920s, these thinkers generated new vocabularies of collectivity for the American context, popularizing terms such as “civilization,” “culture,” and “peoplehood” into the language of Jewish life as ways to signify nationhood without the territorial or statist dimensions.⁴⁸ Kallen invoked a “federation or commonwealth of national cultures.”⁴⁹ Yet the “federation” of which he spoke was a figurative one. The enlargement of American social thought to justify a pluralist ideal of cultural diversity was not actually accompanied by any call for a political reconceptualization of the United States as a democratic republic. Indeed, compared to contemporary Europe, American Jewish nationalists displayed a decided aversion to ideas of communal self-government or political federalism in any practical sense.⁵⁰ Instead, they pursued a dualistic form of Jewish nationalism that used coded language, democratic rhetoric, and political externaliza-

46. *Proceedings of Adjourned Session*, 8; Syrkin, *Yiddisher kongres*, 19.

47. This interpretation is confirmed, unintentionally, by the recent efforts of historians. See Daniel Greene, *The Jewish Origins of Cultural Pluralism: The Menorah Association and American Diversity* (Bloomington, Ind., 2011), and Daniel Katz, *All Together Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers, and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism* (New York, 2011).

48. Pianko, *Zionism and the Roads Not Taken*.

49. Quoted in Greene, *Jewish Origins*, 1.

50. Goren, *Politics and Public Culture*, 145–64.

tion to project a nonpolitical Jewishness at home coupled with a maximalist assertion of their political membership (and leadership) in the global Jewish nation abroad.

This same pattern continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s among American Jewish nationalist leaders. Wise and the American Jewish Congress looked outward to forge links with both Zionism and other related Jewish efforts at global nationalist representation. Wise called for a Jewish state in Palestine and participated in the international 1927 European Conference on the Rights of Minorities. Together with colleagues such as Bernard Richards, in 1936 he helped launch the World Jewish Congress, a successor organization to the Comité des Délégations Juives, itself founded at the Paris Peace Conference. With its establishment, the World Jewish Congress aimed to coordinate all Jewish communities across the globe into an international federation, or, in the eyes of some, a transnational political body. Then, with the outbreak of World War II, American Jewish Congress leaders began to entertain the idea once again of constituting American Jews as a corporate political body. In a 1940 speech, for instance, the Zionist leader Samuel Margoshes proposed retrieving the “Kehilloth concept” for American Jewish society. While he conceded that this type of self-government would not be the same as it had been in Europe, it would be “coeval with Jewish life” on the local level:

Sometimes when thinking of the future of American Jewry . . . I have a vision of an all-representative Jewish body in America which will be not a “roof” organization resting on pillars in New York City, but on human walls extending all over the United States. The future of . . . [this] Congress whether it is called by that name or dubbed, for convenience, “The General Jewish Council”—I see as consisting of the representatives from hundreds of local Jewish councils . . . This will be—if I can use the expression—a Jewish Parliament, democratically constituted, representing all sections and shades in American Jewry, having for its scope all of Jewish life in the U.S., it will function, as all democratic bodies throughout the world, through groups and parties but reaching its decisions by majority and carrying out its activities through a well-laid scheme of agencies working together in harmony and in unity.⁵¹

51. Samuel Margoshes, “Communal Councils and Democracy,” *The Congress Bulletin* 6.24 (1940): 3.

The leaders of the American Jewish Committee observed all of these developments with anxiety and bitterness. They feared this proposed relaunch of the American Jewish Congress movement in the late 1930s. The World Jewish Congress movement was in many respects even worse. Yet, strikingly, they objected less to Zionism's territorial ambitions for Palestine than its political implications for the diaspora. As Morris Waldman of the American Jewish Committee wrote in a 1940 internal memo: "A very sharp distinction must be drawn between *Zionism*, defined as a movement to secure in Palestine the right for Jews to settle and establish a Jewish commonwealth or perhaps eventually even a state, and on the other hand, *Jewish nationalism*, which is the view that all Jews, wherever they may be, belong to the Jewish nation and have a right to establish the counterpart of a national government with branches in the various countries in which Jews live."⁵² Waldman and his colleagues continued to make a distinction between "Zionism" and "diaspora nationalism." They defined the latter, which they also referred to as "political world Jewish nationalism," as an ideology "which considers all Jews throughout the world as part of a world group seeking expression in the international field."⁵³ As then-AJC president Joseph Proskauer explained to Secretary of State Edward Stettinius Jr. in 1944, "My group is deeply concerned over the efforts of the World Jewish Congress and its allies to promulgate what is called the nationalist theory of Jewish life, envisaging Jews as exiles and a diaspora. We think this is a false and dangerous doctrine."⁵⁴

Waldman and many of the American Jewish Committee leaders could countenance a Jewish nation-state. What they truly dreaded was the underlying message of Jewish nationalism: that all Jews belonged to a global ethnic nation. Eventually, precisely this distinction would form the basis for the American Jewish Committee's quick rapprochement with Zionism after 1948. But before that happened, these antinationalists had to confront precisely what they feared most at home: the emergence of

52. Memorandum by M. Waldman to AJC Leadership, March 12, 1940, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research [hereafter YIVO], RG347.1.29, box 53, folder 6.

53. Morris Waldman to Ben Halpern, n.d., Jacob Blaustein Papers (hereafter Blaustein Papers), Johns Hopkins University Library Special Collections, box 1.21, folder 286, "AJC-Waldman, Morris"; Memorandum, "Relationship between American Jewry and Israeli Jewry: Facts and Realities," April 16, 1950, Blaustein Papers, box 2.5, folder A-3-1, "AJC Executive Committee, 1950"; Memo, "Impact of Israel on the American Jewish Community" (1948), Blaustein Papers, box 2.3, folder A-2-8, "Year, File #1, 1948-1949."

54. Joseph Proskauer to Edward Stettinius Jr. February 18, 1944, Blaustein Papers, box 4.65, folder JJ-2-104, "Stettinius, Edward R., 1944."

a new Jewish national political body known as the American Jewish Conference.

THE AMERICAN JEWISH CONFERENCE: COMMUNAL
UMBRELLA OR NATIONAL KEHILLAH?

Among historians of Jewish politics it is a common assumption that the demise of the Congress movement in 1920 marked the final attempt by American Jews to organize themselves into a formal national polity.⁵⁵ In reality, however, the growing crises in Europe and Palestine followed by the outbreak of World War II again raised the question of a national congress. Earlier efforts in the late 1930s to build a united charitable front known first as the “General Council for Jewish Rights” resulted in the creation of the United Jewish Appeal for Refugees and Overseas Needs.⁵⁶ This in turn led the B’nai Brith leadership to call in 1943 for a new organization to coordinate all American Jewish efforts in the fields of European Jewish rescue and refugee resettlement along with larger postwar diplomatic questions. Elections were held that summer; 2,250,000 Jews in 79 cities across the United States participated.

The rise of the American Jewish Conference drew out the same wide range of groups and political perspectives as in World War I. When the first session convened in late August 1943 at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City, the 501 delegates included 378 directly elected and 123 chosen by 64 Jewish membership organizations. The formal platform of the American Jewish Conference adopted at the first session was summarized in its credo: “The American Jewish Conference is the representative body of American Jews, organized democratically for the specific purpose of planning the immediate rescue of European Jewry, taking action upon Jewish postwar problems in Europe and implementing the right of the Jewish people with regard to Palestine.”⁵⁷ The American Jewish Conference would pursue this agenda for the next six years,

55. Ben Halpern, “Diaspora Zionism: Achievements and Problems,” in *Zionism in Transition*, ed. M. Davis (New York, 1980), 47. In the words of Daniel Elazar, “The two Congresses [1918 and 1920] represented the high tide of the Zionist efforts to assume control of the American Jewish communal structure; since 1918 there has never been another comparable effort.” Daniel Elazar, *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry* (Philadelphia, 1995), 207.

56. Alexander Kohanski, “Historical Background on Jewish Representation in the Post-War World,” Central Zionist Archives (hereafter CZA), American Jewish Conference Files, C7/539, folder “Conference Files of the Research Dept. Committee on Research.”

57. *American Jewish Conference: Proceedings* (1943), 1:33.

including lobbying the American government and sending representatives to the United Nations.

In many ways, the American Jewish Conference represented a repetition of the dynamics of a generation earlier. Behind the neutral rhetoric about representation and unity for the sake of Jewish rights abroad lurked the nagging question of a Jewish national polity in the domestic context. The organizers planned to convene an “American Jewish Assembly.” Yet the American Jewish Committee regarded this as a naked assertion of Jewish nationalism. Compounding their anxieties, the conference leadership comprised a number of the leaders from the first effort, thirty years prior, including Louis Lipsky, Stephen S. Wise, Borukh Tsukerman, Julian Mack, Jerome Rothenberg, Bernard Richards, and Joseph Tenenbaum. To temper their fears, the name of the new organization was changed from “Assembly” to “American Jewish Conference,” ostensibly softening the political implications.⁵⁸ However, before the body convened, the American Jewish Committee withdrew, rejecting the endeavor outright.⁵⁹ Proponents and opponents alike viewed the conference as a continuation of an effort begun three decades earlier.

During the run-up to the first session of 1943, the search for a model of what kind of permanent political community could emerge from this American Jewish Conference provoked an interesting discussion among Labor Zionists and General Zionists. In looking to the future, many American Jewish nationalists harked back to the image of the “kehillah.”⁶⁰ The immediate source for this idea was the 1910s experiment in New York City, of course. But behind this model lay the larger philosophy of Autonomism as articulated by the Russian Jewish nationalist Simon Dubnow. Invoking the “kehillah” thus meant more than simply calling for an organized political community. It suggested a decidedly nationalist valence. Writing in *New Palestine*, the Labor Zionist journal, Judah Pilch proposed that democratically elected “Kehilloth” should be

58. *Ibid.*, 1:40–41.

59. The Jewish Labor Committee also withdrew to protest the decision to admit the Jewish People’s Fraternal Order of the International Workers Organization, a Communist group. American Jewish Historical Society (hereafter AJHS), American Jewish Conference Papers, I-67, box 1, folder 4, “Background: Jewish Labor Committee, 1945.”

60. Zionist leader Louis Lipsky, for instance, publicly declared that with time the Conference might well become “the representative body of American Jewry, its Kehillah.” Quoted in a letter from Jesse Calmenson to the American Jewish Conference leadership, November 25, 1945, AJHS, I -67, box 3, folder 2, “Correspondence.”

created in every Jewish community in the United States and then combined under the federal structure of a “National Jewish Community Council.” As previously mentioned, he imagined this “National Council” as the American equivalent of the “Palestinian *Vaad Leumi*.” This Autonomist model, “adjusted to the local conditions and to the American way of life,” would provide “the most ideal expression of Jewish self-government,” resolving the question of Jewish national identity in America.⁶¹ Similar arguments in favor of the conference as a “modern *kehillah*, the equivalent in *huts la’arets* of the Jewish Commonwealth in Palestine” or a *Vaad Leumi*, an “integrated, democratic, all-American Jewish kehillah” or “Jewish parliament,” were all advanced by Reconstructionist leader Ira Eisenstein, the editors of *New Palestine*, and the leader of the Zionist Organization of America, Israel Goldstein.⁶²

In spite of these dramatic rhetorical calls to build an overarching Jewish nationalist political framework in the United States, the conference’s focus turned out to be largely directed outward toward the international sphere, rather than inward into American political life. Each of the sessions—and the activities in the months and years in between—were marked by broad pronouncements from the leadership about how the Conference had introduced “the principle of democratic representation in . . . the American Jewish Community” and now constituted its “authentic representative body.”⁶³ As before, however, the actual entity produced by the elections operated less like a representative political congress with mass membership than an “organization of organizations” coordinating “the work of its affiliated bodies.”⁶⁴ Throughout the proceedings the conference leadership exhibited a consistent pattern. They simultaneously emphasized the nationalist potential of the conference, while deemphasizing its political import in American society.

At the second conference session, held in Pittsburgh in 1944, the question of Jewish life in America was formally put forward. Intense debate

61. Pilch, “By-Products of the Conference,” 7–9. On reactions to Pilch’s idea, see Stanley Weiss, “For a Federation of Kehilloth,” *New Palestine*, August 20, 1943, 17–18, and “For and against the Kehillah,” 26.

62. *New Palestine*, August, 18, 1944, 482–83, and December 15, 1944, 53; *Morgn Zhurnal*, December 3, 1944. M. Boraisha, “Jewish Survival and the American Jewish Congress,” unpublished memo, February 1947, CZA C7/1246, folder “Committee on Future Organization. Minutes and Documents.”

63. Henry Monsky, quoted in *American Jewish Conference: Proceedings* (1945), 2:21, and *American Jewish Conference: Proceedings* (1946), 3:152.

64. David Petegorsky, “The Jewish Community, II: A Proposal for Progress,” *Congress Weekly*, December 20, 1948, 6.

erupted. Some attendees insisted on a political imperative to finish the work begun thirty years before. We must build “a body that unites and coordinates all Jewish national activities—a Jewish parliament,” editorialized the Yiddish-language *Morgn zburnal*.⁶⁵ Others termed it a grave threat to the conference’s very mission if its attention were to be redirected from external crises to the fraught question of “the American scene.” And so, for a second time in two decades, the leadership, including Stephen S. Wise, scrupulously barred themselves from extending the purview of the organization to their own shores. They declared the issue off-limits for fear of destroying the fragile consensus among political factions in the conference.⁶⁶

Just as in the World War I era, the most striking feature of the American Jewish Conference was what was *not* there. During the six years of documented deliberations and correspondence of the American Jewish Conference, the words “nation” and “national” hardly ever appear. The staunchly Zionist leaders and delegates preferred the terms “American Jewish community” and the “Jewish people,” suggesting a much more neutral invocation of Jewish communal life or ethnic solidarity. The strongest reference to American Jews as a nation came in the form of the occasional use of the term “American Israel,” generally in the writings and speeches of older Labor Zionist and General Zionists.⁶⁷ Overall, there was a striking switch to a coded language or resort to neologisms to describe Jewish collectivity in America. Hence the organization referred to itself at various times as the “united Jewish representation,” “a unifying American Jewish agency,” and an “American Jewish union.”⁶⁸ Most of all, they emphasized democratic and organizational rhetoric: the conference was a “democratically constituted over-all Jewish organization.”⁶⁹

65. “The Jewish Conference Session,” *Morgn zburnal*, December 3, 1944, 4.

66. Jane Evans, “Report on the Conference,” *New Palestine*, December 15, 1944, 55; Mrs. Henry Monsky and Maurice Bisgyer, *Henry Monsky, the Man and His Work* (New York, 1947), 119.

67. See, for example, Daniel Frisch, “The Z.O.A. at the Conference,” *New Palestine*, August 20, 1943, 6; Evans, “Report,” 54, and “Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting on April 5, 1943,” AJHS, I-67, box 3, folder 11, “Executive Committee: Minutes, 1943, 1945.”

68. *American Jewish Conference: Proceedings* (1945), 2:229; “American Jewish Conference Final Report of the Executive Committee to the Delegates, Jan. 31, 1949,” AJHS, I-67, box 3, folder 12, “Executive Committee: Memorandum and Miscellaneous Items, 1943–1944, 1948–1949,” 20; *American Jewish Conference: Proceedings* (1946), 3:16.

69. “Final Report,” 19.

What does the obvious lack of conventional nationalist nomenclature in American Jewish self-description signify for the history of Jewish nationalism in America? In both the World War I-era Congress and the World War II-era Conference, American Jews sought the fruits of nationalism without the political encumbrances. They framed all nationalist political activity as a communal impulse and a democratic discourse fully compatible with American liberalism. Though their policy positions were all premised on the assumption that Jews in Eastern Europe and Palestine were members of an ethnic nation represented by a political organization based in the United States, they insisted on bracketing out the political identity of American Jews as irrelevant and exceptional. Jews wanted to act as Americans but in the interests of a Jewish nation.

Defeated in 1944, the proposal to constitute some form of American Jewish polity continued to resurface in meetings in 1945 and 1946.⁷⁰ Attempts were made to bring philanthropic and relief organizations such as the Joint Distribution Committee and the United Jewish Appeal under the conference's direct control. Over the course of 1947 and 1948, the American Jewish Conference leadership launched a formal process to convert the entire umbrella organization into a permanent entity, the American Jewish Assembly. Despite the vociferous opposition of the American Jewish Committee (who still stood outside its formal ranks), the proposal enjoyed a wide range of public support from groups including the Zionist Organization of America, the United Synagogue of America, the Reconstructionist movement and the Reform movement (Union of American Hebrew Congregations), the Jewish People's Fraternal Order, Poale Zion, and others.⁷¹

Again, each one of these proposals for a permanent Assembly steadfastly avoided the language of nationalism and nationhood. Instead their authors spoke of "community" and "people." A formal call was issued for a "permanent, democratic, representative American Jewish body."⁷² As before, a date was set for elections to be held to the political body. Yet as the date approached, the leadership found itself unable to muster enough consistent support from various key leaders representing large Zionist organizations and B'nai Brith to ensure its legal mandate to proceed.⁷³ It emerged that, even minus the presence of explicitly antinationalist ele-

70. Monsky and Bisgyer, *Henry Monsky*, 119.

71. Memorandum (January 28, 1948), CZA, C7/694/6-2, folder "Files of the Commissions, Committees, and Departments of the Conference."

72. "Plan for a Permanent Organization," CZA, C7/1246, folder "Committee on Future Organization Minutes and Documents," 64-69.

73. "Final Report," 16-20.

ments within the Conference, there was little consensus inside the American Jewish nationalist world about a permanent political organization. The political tumult of events in Israel in 1948 also convinced many leaders that energies should not be diverted from the cause there to the American scene.⁷⁴ Backdoor negotiations failed to produce the necessary momentum to organize the elections before the stipulated date of expiration, December 31, 1948.

At its very last meeting, held on November 10, the Committee on Future Organization debated whether they possessed any means of extending their tenure. Alternatively, they considered declaring by fiat the existence of a new organization. Could they ignore the by-laws of the organization and simply announce “one all-inclusive Jewish body representing all Jewry and including all problems of Jewish life”? In the end, the leadership opted to terminate their endeavor out of deference to parliamentary procedure and political reality.⁷⁵ As Louis Lipsky lamented, “In order to set up the Conference and bring all elements within its four walls, the same limiting and crippling conditions had to be agreed to which were imposed upon the first Jewish Congress.” As a result, the American Jewish Conference was a strictly “ad hoc organization . . . bound not to perpetuate itself” without the express consent of its institutional members. Optimistically, he looked for the emergence of the State of Israel to spark a new movement in American Jewish life:

The revolution in Jewish life, now stimulated by the establishment of the State of Israel, will not be ignored by American Jewry today as it was after the first American Jewish Congress . . . The existence of the Jewish State will radically alter inter-Jewish relations, give new meaning to traditions, create new concepts of Jewish life . . . The situation calls for somebody to take up the Torch for the Community.⁷⁶

Two months later, at the final meeting of the Executive Committee, its chairman, Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath, also head of the Reform movement’s Union of American Hebrew Congregations, offered his own analysis of what had gone wrong:

74. “Final Report,” 19.

75. Transcript of Final Meeting of Interim Committee, October 11, 1948, 59–105, CZA, C7/1387/4, folder “Interim Committee: Minutes, Final Meeting of Interim Committee.”

76. Louis Lipsky, “Who Will Pick Up the Torch?” *Congress Weekly*, January 17, 1949, 6.

The conference was the second attempt of American Jews to organize a representative body to deal with post-war Jewish problems. These attempts did not always clearly express the purpose behind the public effort. Always, there was the thought of creating a permanent body representing American Jewry, to deal with its common problems. Frankness at the beginning would have nipped in the bud the whole enterprise. Perforce, unity was established on a narrow plane. Attempts made to broaden the field, at various times, brought about inevitably a paralysis of the effort.

Just as after World War I, he alleged, “a powerful minority made freedom of action impossible.” Still, he concluded, the American Jewish Conference represented a future “blueprint for a permanent American Jewish body.”⁷⁷

Even after the conference’s official dissolution, the debates raged on about the formal political structure of American Jewish life. In October 1949, Daniel Frisch, president of the Zionist Organization of America, issued a public proposal for the “democratization of the Jewish community in America.” He attacked those Jewish leaders who were “staunch believers in democracy where American affairs, notably American politics” were concerned, yet lost “their interest in democratic procedure as soon as they approach Jewish life.” “According to them,” Frisch complained, “American Jewish life, being based entirely on the voluntary principle and complete bereft of the power to force compliance to the decisions of the majority, cannot possibly be governed by democratic procedure.” In reality, he countered, “the fact that the Jewish group in the United States does not possess the legal power to force the consideration of its own needs and requirements [was no obstacle to taking steps] . . . assure its own survival.” For centuries, Jewish communities throughout the world “substitute[d] moral compulsion for force, and there is no reason why the Jewish community of America . . . should not recognize that moral power and be governed by it.” The key to this structure would be to replace the old-time rabbis and the new plutocratic elite with true democratic majoritarian self-rule. The Jewish Community Councils, which raised funds for communal welfare organizations in each city around the country, should come together “in a great conclave to lay the foundations for the all-American Jewish representative body . . . of the

77. “Final Report,” 25–26.

whole of American Israel," possibly with an Upper House [of parliament] for "the Jewish national organizations."⁷⁸

Frisch's impassioned cry fell on deaf ears. One fellow Zionist chastised him for using inflammatory rhetoric. The average non-Jew, he warned, cannot understand the "difference between philanthropic and Nationalistic Zionism."⁷⁹ Calling for a national body within American society would only hurt the cause of Israel and the status of American Jews. The non-Zionist fold also protested. Proskauer's successor at the AJC, Jacob Blaustein, declared in 1950 that support for Israel had nothing to do with Jewish nationalism: "The 'Zion' in Zionism we have always favored, always striven to aid; it is the special 'ism' in Zionism that we do not accept. That 'ism' has no faith in Emancipation; it preaches the inevitability of a murderous anti-Semitism, almost as much a fact of nature as the law of gravity. This we reject totally." Once assured by the new Israeli leadership that the Jewish state was "not operating on the concept of world Jewish nationalism," the AJC quickly came to make its peace with support for Israel.⁸⁰

Out of the ruins of the American Jewish Conference grew the two Jewish organizations that remain the dominant forces in American Jewish politics today. In place of a central body, a compromise umbrella organization, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, was launched by nearly all of the major Jewish organizations. Its mandate, tellingly, was to represent the American Jewish community to the U.S. government in matters related to Israel. As envisioned, it functions as a loose aggregation of leaders of national organizations rather than a mass membership or political organization.

The other organization to emerge directly from the demise of the American Jewish Conference was the now legendary American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Begun in 1951, the lobbying organization was initiated by Isaiah "Si" Kenen, who had served as executive director of the American Jewish Conference, followed by a brief stint in the Israeli UN delegation. Both the continuities and ruptures between Kenen's political ventures neatly reflect how American Jewish national-

78. Daniel Frisch, *Democratization of the American Jewish Community* (New York, 1949), 4–8.

79. Letter from Grover Sales to Jacob Blaustein, September 23, 1949, box 2.3, folder A-2–8 "Year, File #1, 1948–49."

80. Jacob Blaustein, draft speech, "Relationship between American Jewry and Israeli Jewry. Facts and Realities," April 16, 1950, Blaustein Papers, box 2.5, folder a-3–1, "AJC Executive Committee 1950."

ism morphed after 1948 into its present-day form. In a private letter in 1960 to the philanthropist Daniel Koshland, Kenen explained the genesis of AIPAC:

When we began this work in 1951, the first question we had to answer was: "In whose name do you speak?" The American Jewish Conference had been liquidated in 1948. All of us knew how difficult it would be to create a new overall instrument. On the other hand, lawyers insisted that I could not undertake this work as a counsel or agent of the Israel[i] government. I had to represent an American body. Accordingly, I became counsel for the Washington office of the American Zionist Council. But it was agreed that I would have the cooperation of all Jewish communities, and throughout this period we have had informal ad hoc committees representing all the Zionist and non-Zionist organizations concerned in this area.⁸¹

Notably, Kenen went on to explain, AIPAC was first called the "American Zionist Committee for Public Affairs." Then, in 1958, the name was changed to reflect the fact "that we received generous support from non-Zionist sources" and to avoid arbitrary and inaccurate "limits on the size and strength of our constituency." "I hasten to add that I have been a Zionist all my life and will continue to be one."⁸²

According to Kenen, only two Jewish groups refused to work with AIPAC: the Zionist Organization of America and the American Council for Judaism. The former attacked the decision to remove the label "Zionist" as a betrayal of Jewish nationalism; the latter disputed the notion that Jews were anything other than individual adherents of a religious faith. In between these extremes, the postwar American Jewish consensus on Israel was born. Solidarity with Jewish nationhood concentrated in the State of Israel emerged hand in hand with silence regarding Jewish nationhood at home in America.

CONCLUSION

In 1903, the Russian Jewish historian and political leader Simon Dubnow published the eleventh installment of his *Letters on Old and New Judaism*. In it, he called on American Jews to embrace the option of national autonomy in the United States:

81. Isaiah Kenen to Daniel Koshland, October 19, 1960, AJHS, Isaiah Kenen Papers, P-680, box 15, folder 183, "San Francisco Conference."

82. *Ibid.*

Real and broad autonomy is especially possible in countries in which the principle prevails that the government does not interfere in the private lives of its citizens, and where authoritarian governments or exaggerated concentration of power do not exist. In such countries, especially in the United States of America, Jews could enjoy even now a large measure of self-administration if they only were willing to advance beyond the confines of the “religious community.”⁸³

Exactly forty years later, at the start of the American Jewish Conference, the Lithuanian Jewish politician and international lawyer Jacob Robinson observed, “I have been taught many things [since my arrival in this country] and I have learned that this is a paradise for minorities, provided that the minorities want to make use of it. The great tragedy is that they do not want to make use of the possibilities that are offered.”⁸⁴ As East European Jewish nationalists, Dubnow and Robinson each struggled to understand the core tension within Jewish nationalism in the United States. In their eyes, the United States constituted a multiethnic federal state where voluntary association might form the basis for a liberal form of national autonomy. What American Jews might necessarily forfeit in terms of state recognition and formal self-government they would compensate for in unparalleled political freedom. But their vision was not to be. First in 1920, and again in 1948, American Jews declined to constitute a formal national polity consistent with their nationalist commitments.

The recovery of these two historical episodes testifies to the ambiguous success of Jewish nationalism. Each time, American Jews did not so much reject ethnic Jewish nationalism as formulate their own idiosyncratic version of it. Before 1948, American Jews aggressively advanced their international agenda for the Jewish nation. Yet they maintained an ambivalent silence about political organization at home. Hence the complicated dynamics of coded language, the steadfast focus on external political goals, and the deep resistance to building an overarching collective framework. This was not merely exceptionalism—a belief that America was not *galut* (exile) and hence the conventions of Jewish

83. Simon Dubnow, *Pis'ma o starom i novom evreistve (1897–1907)* (St. Petersburg, 1907), 283, quoted in translation in Simon Dubnow, *Nationalism and History: Essays on Old and New Judaism*, ed. K. S. Pinson (Philadelphia, 1958), 139. I have made slight emendations to this translation based on the Russian original.

84. Minutes of Postwar Committee Meeting, August 1943, CZA, C7/215, 445–46, folder “Conference: Sessions: First Session (August 1943): Minutes of Committees.”

nationhood as conceived elsewhere did not apply. It was a political pattern developed in reaction to the larger tensions between nationalism and liberalism in American society. At the moments when international crisis created the mandate to reconceptualize global Jewish nationhood and the American Jewish place within it, these liberal nationalists struggled with the prospect of a Jewish polity. For, in their eyes, to create a permanent American Jewish parliamentary body risked jeopardizing the careful balancing act between visible ethnic mobilization and national invisibility. They wished to act on behalf of a Jewish nation abroad while remaining politically—and legally—undifferentiated from the broader American polity. They implicitly understood the imperative of American liberalism: that Jews must shrink their public collective identity into a form of private faith or symbolic ethnicity in order to earn full inclusion into the American body politic.⁸⁵ Marking themselves explicitly as conationals of a Jewish nation proved undesirable after both World War I and World War II.

In one of his final published essays, the historian Salo Baron posed the question: “Is America Ready for Minority Rights?” His answer was a qualified “no.” After outlining all the limitations and problems with national minority rights as envisioned from the nineteenth century to the Second World War, he concluded that he personally felt “ambivalent” about what such “a system of ethnic minority rights” could mean in American society, “I see both advantages and disadvantages of such a system. In any case . . . it would have to be quite different from the methods employed in interwar Europe.”⁸⁶ Then he ended his essay on a curious note:

Even without formal recognition of Jewish minority rights (in fact with many Jews themselves still denying the existence of a Jewish nationality), the Jewish community in America has been able to build up a magnificent structure of a novel type of communal organization before, during, and after the flowering melting pot ideology. It now serves, in many respects, as a model for Jewish communities in the diaspora. While formally treated mainly as a religious community, it succeeded in enlisting even financial aid from the government for some of its numerous, essentially secular, Jewish organizations in the fields

85. Laura Levitt, “Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference: Revisiting Jewish Secularism,” *American Quarterly* 59.3 (2007): 807–9.

86. Salo Baron, “Is America Ready for Minority Rights?” *Jewish Social Studies* 46.3/4 (1984): 205.

of education and social welfare. This basically autonomous structure could be further extended under some new forms of ethnic minority rights.⁸⁷

Baron's call for Jews to recognize themselves as an autonomous ethnic or national minority akin to the interwar European reality, albeit adjusted to the American context, echoes precisely the language of the 1940s and 1950s partisans of the American Jewish Conference. In his 1984 proposal, he even observes the irony by which some Jews enjoy collective rights yet fail to recognize their membership in a Jewish collectivity ("Jewish nationality"). He implies that Jews in American society form an invisible nation—an unmarked national minority, with a diasporic autonomous existence. Yet what Baron does not mention are the implications of this compromise for relations with the rest of the Jewish world. Nor does he consider the possibility that as the European experience grows more and more remote for American Jews, the existence of an informal, unmarked polity in which Jews are automatically inscribed, whether they know it or not, may no longer be tenable as a model of Jewish collective politics.

A popular late 1990s-era Israeli bumper sticker reads "Separate Religion and State" (*Tufrad ha-dat min ha-medina*). To Israeli democracy and religious pluralism advocates, the failure to separate Judaism from the Israeli state puts both at risk. Today, arguably, the same might be said of "nation" and "state." The disappearance of the Jewish nation into the Jewish state has had profound consequences for nationalism and democratic politics in contemporary Israeli society and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But no less significant has been its effect on American Jewish political identity. Over the course of the twentieth century, American Jews forged political consensus about nationalism by projecting their own nationhood onto Israel. Both the Zionist and the non-Zionist Jew, who could not otherwise agree on a definition of Jewishness, reached an accord: the Jewish nation lived not in the United States but in Israel.

This surrender of a local national identity, however, gradually left American Jews curiously mute when it came to defining their own relationship to both Zionism and Israel. Today American Jews remain adept defenders (and critics) of Israel. Yet in a new, post-Cold War, post-Oslo era, they often struggle to articulate Israel's political (or theological)

87. *Ibid.*, 207–8.

meaning inside American Jewish life.⁸⁸ The very features that allowed AIPAC to become such a successful lobbying group in the past forty years—its amorphous national identity as a strictly American organization whose sole mission is to influence U.S. policy, not to represent Israel or other Jewish interests—no longer resonate in an increasingly polarized, cynical American Jewish political culture. Indeed, one could argue that the lack of transparency regarding AIPAC's identity politics and policy-making (more than its ideological tilt) drives the controversy associated with its role and influence today. As for JStreet, AIPAC's new rival, it too has focused narrowly on U.S. and Israeli foreign policy, rather than addressing the core question of American Jewish collective identity. Both of these organizations, like the American Jewish populace as a whole, no longer recognize that nation and state do not automatically require conjoining.

Strangers to the language of nationhood, American Jews find themselves ill-equipped to understand even the statist nationalism in which they are implicated. Even less so can they creatively imagine alternative paths forward in terms of forging a deeper solidarity with Israel, a thicker sense of responsibility to global Jewish population, and a fuller appreciation of the complexities of the national conflict between Israelis and Palestinians (as well as the dilemmas of identity among Arab citizens of Israel). Even as contemporary Jewish life grows progressively more transnational in character, with ongoing migration and dual-citizen individuals an increasingly common reality, American Jews have not rushed to retrieve the term "nation" to define their relationship to Jewish collectivity.⁸⁹ Whether they should do so remains an open question. In order to give it proper consideration, however, we must first confront the persistent legacy of the American Jewish past.

88. Yosef Gorny, *The State of Israel in Jewish Public Thought* (New York, 1994).

89. For thoughtful prescriptive writing in this direction, see David Myers, "Rethinking the Jewish Nation: An Exercise in Applied Jewish Studies" (accessed September 9, 2014), <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/history/myers/havru ta%206%20page%2026-33.pdf>, and Pianko, *Zionism*, 178–209.