PART THREE

Zionism in an American Setting
"If I forget thee, O Zion" has been a pious incantation of the Jewish people for over two millennia. For most of that time, it has had a venerable religious meaning: Jews would continue to remember Zion, and their God would remember them, ultimately delivering them out of the bondage of exile and returning them to the land promised to their fathers. Human beings alone could do nothing to bring about this deliverance; God, at the chosen time, would accomplish the miracle.

In the nineteenth century many traditional Jewish assumptions were altered. The emancipation process initiated by the French National Assembly eventually freed Jews in various lands from discriminatory regulations under which they had lived for centuries. Departing the ghetto, many Jews also sought to leave behind what they considered anachronistic religious beliefs and practices. The Haskalah, the so-called Jewish enlightenment, led European Jews to seek cultural and political knowledge heretofore of secondary importance to them. For some, this in turn led to an abandonment of principles and rituals that had been part of Jewish life for centuries, including frequently expressed hopes for the ingathering of the exiled Jews to the Holy Land. Reform Judaism, for example, which sought a "modern" religion in a society where Jews would be French or German or English of the "Judaic persuasion," eliminated the prayers to return to Zion from its liturgy.

Exposure to nineteenth-century European secular thought, especially the waves of nationalism that swept over the continent, led
other Jews to a different conclusion. They would seek to return to Zion not by divine intercession but by their own efforts. They would go to Palestine, they would build up the land, and they would create a new Zion themselves. The origins of modern Zionism, the tales of the Biluim and of the First Zionist Congress, are well known to us. We are also aware that from the beginning Zionism had different factions and was nearly torn apart by the resulting tensions. We can identify the factions and their leaders: religious Zionists, led by Isaac Jacob Reines, Abraham Isaac Kook, and Meyer Berlin (later Bar-Ilan); socialists, inspired by Ber Borochov and Nachman Syrkin; cultural or spiritual Zionists, who adhered to the teachings of Ahad Ha-am; and political Zionists, of whom Theodor Herzl was the towering figure in Europe.¹

From the beginning, though, these strains overlapped, far more than many of their adherents admitted. Even the most fervent socialists often harbored strong religious and cultural ties to the land of Zion even if they refused to acknowledge them. Political Zionists, who concentrated on what they considered the chief task, that of securing the international arrangements that would allow the Jewish people to settle once again in its ancient homeland, shared these Jewish values. As time went on, these strains of Zionism developed their own agendas, not just religious, economic, and cultural, but political as well. Rather than acknowledging how much they had in common, they often seemed bent on emphasizing their differences. The old saw about the multiplicity of Jewish opinions seemed the hallmark of the Zionist movement in the first part of the twentieth century.

American Zionism from the start mirrored the European movement in its fragmentation. It also differed from it in many significant ways, and these differences would prove critical as the years went on.² Thus, American Jews did not face the rampant antisemitism that had long marked European society.³ As a result, certain types of Zionism did not take root as strongly in this country as did others. Socialists, for example, found the United States so open a society and economy that, instead of attacking capitalism, they often ended up becoming capitalists themselves. Also, immigrants coming to the New World wanted to become "Amerikaners" and to shed as quickly as possible every cultural trait that marked them as
different, be it the speech, dress, or religious practices of European Jews.

If being too religious or too socialist made recent Jewish immigrants uncomfortable, they found during the First World War that political Zionism was not only acceptable but highly effective. They learned, as Louis D. Brandeis constantly preached to them, that they could be both good Americans and good Jews by being good Zionists.¹

I have argued elsewhere that, given the circumstances of American society in the first decades of the twentieth century, only the Brandeisian form of Zionism, with its emphasis on American values, could have succeeded.⁵ It succeeded brilliantly, not only during the First World War but also after the Second, when American Zionists influenced the political situation that helped create the State of Israel. In certain ways, the very nature of American political Zionism was the cause of its great failure—the inability to save European Jews in the 1930s and 1940s—and the cause of its decline after 1949. I want briefly to limn the contours of American Zionism, both its triumphs and its failures, and to suggest why a political route may have been the only feasible one for Zionism in this country.

On the eve of World War I, Zionism in the United States seemed moribund. The umbrella organization, the Federation of American Zionists (FAZ), had about twelve thousand members, a large number of them recent immigrants, out of a total Jewish population that approached two million. The most dynamic figure in the movement, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, had resigned from office, frustrated by the backstabbing and petty jealousies of European leaders who treated American Jewry as a provincial backwater good for nothing else but monetary support (which, they complained, never met their expectations).

The problems of the American Zionists went beyond the animosities between the world organization and the American one. Immigrant Jews looked not to the Zionists, most of whom were themselves also newcomers, but to the German Jews, the Yahudim, who had immigrated a generation earlier and were now well established economically and socially. The Yahudim emphasized the need for
rapid Americanization; they urged those who had recently arrived to shed their old language, their old clothes, and their old religious practices. Nothing less fit their notion of true American values than Zionism, which they derided as fostering dual loyalties. It was one thing to pray, in the abstract, for a return to Zion (although most of them as Reform Jews did not do that); it was quite another to embark on a harebrained scheme to bring it about.6

The leaders of the FAZ could do little to galvanize the members; most paid the shekel but did little else to further the Zionist cause. After all, they had made aliyah, not to Eretz Yisrael, but to the goldine medine, America. Here they faced daily problems of making a living, of keeping a roof over their heads and food on their family tables. The American capitalist system offered enough of a challenge; socialists did not have time to worry about the utopia they hoped to build in Palestine. Religious Jews discovered that a land of freedom could be just as destructive of tradition as a land of pogroms, while those who read Ahad Ha-am had a better idea of what a cultural center might resemble in some future Jewish homeland than how to foster that Jewish culture in America. Aside from raising some money for the Jewish National Fund and the Zionist Bank, the FAZ did not offer much by way of a program.

All this changed when war broke out in August 1914. Zionists now had a specific task, that of saving the fledgling Jewish settlements in Palestine. It soon became clear that the American Jewish Committee, the organization of the Yahudim, dominated overseas charity work. The Zionists would have to figure out not only how to raise money but also how to deliver that money to Palestine, and at the same time how to gain a voice in American Jewish affairs. These tasks called not for religious zeal, socialist idealism, or cultural sensitivity but for political pragmatism—the strength that Louis D. Brandeis and his lieutenants brought to American Zionism when they took over the leadership in the summer of 1914.

Brandeis and men like Felix Frankfurter, Julian Mack, Bernard Flexner, and Stephen Wise had honed their political skills in the arena of progressive reform. If, as some critics claimed, they made redeeming the Holy Land sound like enacting a factory safety law, they proved adept at both. Within a short period the invigorated Zionist movement became a major player not only in American
Jewish affairs but also in American political life. It played an effective role in raising relief funds, and, through the American Jewish Congress movement, it challenged the Yahudim for leadership of the community. When Great Britain expressed a willingness to sponsor a Jewish homeland in Palestine after the war, Brandeis and Wise played a critical role in securing approval of the Balfour Declaration from the Wilson administration. By 1919, the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA), as it was now called, had over 170,000 members, operated medical and relief facilities in Palestine, and had access to the world’s leaders at the Paris Peace Conference.

Why this sudden success, and why the collapse of this power within two years? Success came because the war presented tangible objectives that the Zionists could address through methods acceptable to the general populace. Relief work for the settlements in Palestine could be seen as part of a larger effort by many Americans to help war-torn communities in Europe, such as the program headed by Herbert Hoover to aid Belgium. Just as immigrants and their children assisted relatives and friends in the old country, in the Zionist case Jews were helping other Jews.

For quite different reasons, the Zionists also found widespread public support for the Balfour Declaration. Although some Christian groups opposed granting Jews hegemony over Palestine, many more believed that both divine and secular reasons justified a Jewish return. For some sects, Jewish return to the Holy Land would precede the second coming of Christ and should therefore be encouraged, a belief that still undergirds fundamentalist Christian support of Israel. Also, the Zionist campaign made support of the Balfour Declaration appear very American, an endorsement of Jewish pioneers settling and reclaiming a wilderness, just as Americans had done.

One can speculate that antisemitism and xenophobia also played a role. Immigration restriction had been gaining ground even before the war and even won its first major victory in the passing of a literacy test for immigrants over Wilson’s veto in 1917. The war slowed down migration but the pace picked up immediately after the end of hostilities, triggering renewed efforts to limit or cut off the flood of newcomers entering the country. Many of the prewar immigrants had been Jews from Eastern Europe, and Zionists recog-
nized that there would be no place for them to go if the anti-
immigration forces had their way. By calling for a home in Pales-
tine, the Zionists played this card to their advantage.

Relief work and lobbying for the Balfour Declaration involved
little that could be described as overtly Jewish. American Zionists,
then and later, would have their greatest success when they could
clothe their efforts in nonreligious garb. They could utilize as justi-

ication for their movement the age-old yearning for redemption,
but that was an idealization that Christian Americans could easily
accept without identifying it as peculiarly Jewish. Moreover, for
American Zionists, return was indeed an abstraction; they wanted
a homeland not for themselves but for Jews fleeing persecution in
Europe. In short, the Zionists would be most effective, as Brandeis
predicted, when they acted primarily as Americans and not as Jews.

This proved anathema to Chaim Weizmann and the leadership
of European Zionism. For them redemption had not only religious
connotations but also an immediate relevance for their own lives—
they did plan to make aliyah, they did plan to participate person-
ally in rebuilding the land, and, regardless of their party affiliation,
they did wholeheartedly believe that the rebuilt homeland in Pales-
tine, whatever its political or economic configuration, would be
Jewish. To them, the Brandeisian approach robbed Zionism of its
Jewish core, reducing it to little more than a philanthropic
endeavor.

Soon after the war, Weizmann and his coterie decided to wrest
the momentum back from the American leadership. On one level,
this amounted to little more than a power play to determine who
would govern the invigorated Zionist enterprise. On another level,
however, it involved a struggle for the Jewish soul of Zionism.¹

The Eastern European immigrants who made up the bulk of ZOA
membership had applauded the Brandeis leadership and reveled in
the idea that Zionism—to them an overwhelmingly Jewish activ-
ity—could be made respectably American. But they never under-
stood or accepted the nuances that Brandeis used to make Zionism
divisible from Judaism. When Weizmann came to America in 1921,
they saw a Jewish leader who was recognizably Jewish, a mentsh, a
man who spoke Yiddish as well as English and who emphasized the
Jewishness of the return. Given this situation and the attitudes of
American Jewry at the time, Weizmann won his victory at the ZOA convention in Cleveland in 1921.\(^8\)

Weizmann installed his supporters, all of whom shared his views, as the leadership of the movement. American Zionism practically disappeared in the 1920s; membership dropped from 180,000 in 1919 to eighteen thousand in 1929. In the Roaring Twenties, a movement that emphasized ethnic or religious particularism seemed out of step in a nation that closed its gates to further immigration, a nation in which the Ku Klux Klan and other groups preached a doctrine of conformity to white, Christian values.\(^9\) The decline could not, of course, be blamed entirely on the incompetence of Louis Lipsky and his clique. Even had the Brandeisians retained power there would have been a drop in membership and influence. But one segment of American Zionism did not abandon the earlier model: Hadassah, which continued to follow the Brandeisian ethos, alone of all American Zionist groups retained its strength and influence during this decade.

The Brandeisians, now led by Stephen Wise and Robert Szold, returned to power in the early thirties and began the slow process of rebuilding the movement. Unfortunately, at the same time they had to deal with the greatest threat ever faced by the Jewish people. Some writers have placed particular blame on American Zionists for American Jewry's failure to rescue European Jews from the Nazis. They charge the Zionists with refusing to cooperate with other groups and with ignoring possibilities for rescue in a calculating, cold-blooded drive to secure a Jewish state after the war.\(^10\) Other scholars have argued that, given conditions during the Depression and in wartime America, American Jews did all they could have done; nothing would have deterred Hitler from his monomaniacal quest to exterminate the Jewish people.\(^11\)

My views coincide with those of the latter group.\(^12\) Let me suggest that, in the 1930s and 1940s, rescue in the sense of bringing Jews to America went against what could be considered "American values."\(^13\) Placing rescue first would have appeared to be special pleading for a particular group at a cost that all Americans would have to pay. As long as millions of Americans remained out of work, and as long as American boys faced death at the hands of the
Axis, special pleading for Jews—or for any other ethnic or religious group—would have triggered opposition and not support from the American people.  

Stephen Wise recognized this and so did Abba Hillel Silver. It was Silver who made the decision that, if the Zionists could not effect a rescue during the war, they should get on with the task of securing an independent Jewish homeland so that the survivors would have a place to go after the war. This decision should be placed in the context of Zionist political activity as described earlier. The numbers of American Zionists increased; their influence expanded; they won widespread support from all segments of American society as they focused their energies on the task of securing an independent Jewish state in Palestine.

Part of their success derived from their skillful exploitation of the guilt the Holocaust had engendered in Christian America. Other Jewish groups that wanted to bring Jews to America did not succeed because their appeals struck Congress as special pleading, pleading at the expense of other groups also wounded by the war and of Americans in general. The Zionists put forward a plan that did not threaten American jobs or resources. They called on Americans to help the Yishuv stand on its own feet, to allow Palestine to be a haven for the oppressed—in short, to do the “American thing.” Probably no more successful lobby effort can be found in American history than that undertaken by the American Zionists after the war, and it succeeded in large part because an Americanized leadership, schooled in American political practice, utilized traditional American devices to win support for what they depicted as a prototypically American enterprise. There was little if any religious content to the Zionist effort. They reminded the American people that Jews had been the major victims of the Nazis; for millions of Americans, as well as for American Jews, to be good Americans in the late 1940s meant being good Zionists, defined as supporting the creation of a Jewish state.

Then, once again, a movement that bestrode the American political scene like a colossus collapsed and practically disappeared from view. Forty years after the establishment of Israel, American Zionism is a hollow shell without purpose or influence. The only excep-
tion is still Hadassah, and even that group does not command the power it enjoyed in past years. There are several reasons for this development. One of them might be described as becoming the victim of success.\textsuperscript{17}

Traditionally the Zionist movement outside of the Holy Land had three major programs—fundraising, education, and political activity. Hadassah raised money to support medical and educational work in the Yishuv; the Jewish National Fund sought funds to reclaim land and plant trees. Other Zionist agencies supported educational work, such as teaching Hebrew as a modern language or running summer camps to prepare people to live in Palestine. Political activity involved lobbying Congress, garnering public support, and making presentations to the Congress, the League of Nations, royal commissions, and the United Nations.

The crises of the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel had meant that the Zionists had to put nearly all of their energy and resources into political activity in the decade ending with Israeli independence. Now, the sovereign Jewish state—not the Zionist Organization of America—would speak for the Yishuv to the United States, the United Nations, and other world bodies. Even before 1948, the locus of fundraising had shifted from Zionist agencies to the United Jewish Appeal, which had access to a larger constituency and to wealthy Jews who might be friendly to Israel but did not consider themselves Zionists. Moreover, the largest single source of outside funds for Israel in the past four decades has not been the Jewish communities of the Diaspora, but the government of the United States, to which Israeli officials spoke. The ZOA had never done well in its educational efforts (nor, for that matter, had any other Zionist body outside a very limited periphery). What would Zionists do?

They could do little. In part this resulted from a decision by the Israeli government and its prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, to cut down the power of American Zionism and especially the influence of Abba Hillel Silver, whom Ben-Gurion saw as a rival.\textsuperscript{18} But even if Ben-Gurion had wanted to maintain a strong Zionist force in the Diaspora, it is unlikely that he would have succeeded. Given the American polity, it would have been impossible for an American organization to be a strong and continuing advocate of a foreign
nation and its policies. Moreover, the contradictions between the Israeli and European Zionist agenda and the philosophy of the American Jewish community would have led at some point to a split.

Even had there been no divergence between American Zionism and the Israeli government, hard times would have befallen American Zionism after 1949. Membership in the movement dropped after the establishment of Israel, just as it had plummeted after the success of World War I. Many Jews joined the Zionist movement because it was the only outlet through which they could express support for the Yishuv. After 1949, American Jewry became Zionized in the sense that nearly all American Jews support the continued existence of the State of Israel. But they do so not through Zionist organizations (with the exception of Hadassah) but through local community federations and the United Jewish Appeal.19

Zionism in the United States today is the legacy of the Brandeis era in that it is widespread, does not hold aliyah to be a central tenet, and supports the Jewish community in the Holy Land. It is far more philanthropic than ideological. While Israel occupies a central place in the minds and hearts of American Jews,20 it does so as a cultural and emotional symbol rather than a religious one.

American Jews express their support of Israel through donations to the UJA and specific programs such as the Hadassah hospital, the American Friends of Israeli Universities, and so forth. They travel to Israel and may even send their children there for summer or semester programs. When Israel is endangered, they are vocal in its support. But Zionist organizations such as the ZOA, Mizrachi, and even Hadassah are notable by their absence from any central place in this scheme. The chief organ for the expression of American Jewish views is the Council of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations. While a Zionist will occasionally be elected as the spokesperson, he or she will not bring any overtly “Zionist” message to that task, other than generalized support of Israel. The most effective Israel lobby is the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), a registered agent of a foreign government.21

Does this mean that American Zionists no longer play a political role in the nation's life? In comparison to the work of the Zionist Organization of America from 1917 to 1919 under Brandeis, or the
American Zionist Emergency Council under Silver and Wise from 1942 to 1949, there is no organized Zionist presence on the American political scene today. If we define Zionism as support of Israel, then the federations, the Council of Presidents, and others work long, hard, and effectively to maintain public support for the Jewish state. Their success is limited by variations of the same constraints that limited Zionists during the 1930s and 1940s—support of Israel must be cast in terms of American interests and American principles.

During most of the past forty years this has not been difficult. Americans had little love for the Arab states, which have nondemocratic governments. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism, with hatred of Israel as a rallying cry, has not set well with Americans, who, no matter how strong their own religious convictions, believe in separation of church and state. Until 1980, Israel seemed to be David battling Goliath, and its impressive military victories, especially in 1967, won the hearts of many Americans. From 1949 to 1980 one could be pro-Israel and call for American support of Israel on the grounds that it would be good for America.

Since 1980, this has not been easy. Israel’s invasion of Lebanon, its rule of Arabs in the occupied territories, its intransigence regarding discussions with the PLO, and the rise of a Jewish fundamentalism as narrow minded as its Islamic counterparts have led to significant decline in support of Israel, not only among Americans in general but also among American Jews. It is, after all, difficult to talk about “endangered Israel” when the evening news features film clips of Israeli soldiers beating Arab children. The principle that held true in 1917, in 1941, and in 1991 remains constant: American Jews lobby effectively to support the Jews in the Holy Land only if such support is perceived as not running counter to American ideals or interests. The Gulf War, in which Israel showed remarkable constraint, has made the backing of Israel once again compatible with the overall scheme of American interests; pictures of Israeli children in gas masks huddling in shelters during SCUD attacks did much to cancel, at least temporarily, the earlier pictures of Israel as a brutal occupational force.

In sum, the success of American Zionists, either in earlier organizational manifestations or in a generalized contemporary form, has
been directly tied to how well they acted within acceptable American norms. So long as the Zionists remained dominated by European ideological thinking, they were ineffective. The American people would only side with the Zionist dream, and later the Jewish state, if they could see it in terms of American ideals and principles; in a similar fashion the American government has been most supportive of Israel when it has appeared to be in America's interests to be so.

In the debate over the alleged failure of American Jewry during the Holocaust years, critics have accused American Jews in general and the Zionists in particular of not using their immense political power. The error here is to assume that the successes of the Zionists in rallying support for Israel, such as in the late 1940s and then in the midsixties, represents the normative level of Zionist political power. Although the so-called Jewish lobby is well organized, its power is far less than meets the eye. The best study of this subject concludes that although the pro-Israel lobby does have political muscle, its story "is a very American story, ... a tale of how the American system works, for better or for worse, and how one group has exploited it on behalf of its own interests." 23

What Zionist leaders with any understanding of the American political process learned long ago is that their achievements were directly related to their ability to channel their efforts within mainstream American politics. When they could argue that the Zionist cause complemented American interests and ideals, they flourished; when they could not, no matter how great the need, they failed. The politicization of American Zionists is, therefore, in many ways their Americanization as well.

Notes


2. I have explored these themes in greater detail in American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday,
3. I am not saying that there was no antisemitism in the United States but rather that compared with European society, prejudice against Jews was functionally nonexistent. While there had been restraints against Jews in colonial days, by the late nineteenth century no state barred Jews from voting or holding office or from engaging in any trade or profession. Although some upper-class German-American Jews faced social discrimination toward the end of the century, the mass of Eastern Europeans who came here after 1880 marveled at the freedom they found in this country. For a good survey, see John Higham, Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1955).


5. American Zionism, especially ch. 4.


13. None of the other options that defenders of the Bergson group and other “rescue efforts” acclaim would have been viable, and no one really took any of them seriously. The only real option would have been Palestine, but the gates to the Yishuv had been closed by the British with the 1939 White Paper.


15. Marc Lee Raphael, Abba Hillel Silver: A Profile in American Judaism
(New York: Holmes & Meier, 1989), ch. 6. No one, not Silver nor Wise nor even Weizmann, knew the full extent of the massacres until after the war.


17. Here again, I rely upon but do not wish to repeat arguments made earlier; see We Are One!, esp. ch. 11. More optimistic views can be found in the discussions in Moshe Davis, ed., Zionism in Transition (New York: Arno, 1980), particularly 45–78 and 275–372.

18. We Are One!, ch. 11.


22. A suggestive parallel is that of American Irish support of a unified Ireland. The more violently the Irish Republican Army acts, the less politically feasible it is to support its political goals in the United States. Similarly, Americans support the idea of a secure Israel but cannot condone the tactics adopted by the Jewish state in the last decade to achieve that goal.