The Americanization of the Jews

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Jews often say that America is different: conditions and contexts that have marked Jewish life in other times and places have been absent here or have been reconfigured in unique ways. Thus, the American Jewish experience is singular because a strong commitment to Enlightenment, liberal ideals, the relative weakness of antisemitism, the absence of a medieval corporate past, and the high degree of separation between religion and the state have all combined to make this country an extraordinary locus for Jewish life.¹

In the early twentieth century, this distinctiveness manifested itself among American Jews in the rapid diminution of the ethnic-national components of their Jewishness. Systematic accommodation to the realities of American life meant that, with the advancing Americanization of the descendants of Eastern European immigrants, American Jewry transformed itself, according to Will Herberg, “into an American religious community.”² Oscar Handlin concurred that “Jewish identification remained most meaningful in the [only] area of diversity America most clearly recognized—that of religion.”³ Certainly by the 1940s public self-identification in religious, not ethnic or national terms, was the dominant, albeit not exclusive, tendency among American Jews.

For American Zionism, the American conceptualization of Judaism as essentially a religion in the American sense had far-reaching
consequences. Like American Jewry in Jewish history, American Zionism has been distinctive in the modern Zionist movement. Evyatar Friesel maintained that American Zionism "exercised very little leadership in the development of Zionism either ideologically or organizationally. . . . It had no influence on the growth of the Zionist party system, . . . a system which ran against the political patterns of American general society."4 Eliezer Livneh in State and Diaspora, published by the Jewish Agency in 1953, concluded, "The truth is that there never existed in America a Zionist movement in the accepted [European] sense of that term."5

Unlike Europe, then, Zionism in America was to be spoken of primarily in religious, not nationalistic, terms. Melvin Urofsky, in his comprehensive study of the Zionist movement in America during the period prior to the creation of the State of Israel, observed that as early as Brandeis, who established the contours of American Zionism, the American movement constantly "downplayed the nationalistic ideology upon which European Zionism thrived." Given the nature of American society, there was, in effect, no choice. "To have done otherwise," Urofsky wrote, "would have condemned Zionism in America to the perpetual status of an ethnic fringe group, which immigrants in the process of acculturation would have shed."6 Evyatar Friesel concurred that American Zionism "integrated religion and Zionism in a workable way that was never reached in European-based or European-inspired Zionism." Friesel continued, "It is justified to speak about a Zionized American Jewry represented in large measure by its religious movements."7 A link between religion and Zionism was forged in the United States that was unique in the history of the Zionist movement.8

The principal architects of this link were rabbis, chief among them Conservative rabbis trained at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.9 "A veritable bastion of Zionism" at the turn of the century, JTSA, under the leadership of Solomon Schechter, affirmed a notion of cultural Zionism that, as Naomi W. Cohen has observed, would promote "a strongly religious national life for diaspora Jewry."10 Schechter and Conservative rabbis such as Mordecai Kaplan and Solomon Goldman, who were informed by the moralism that has dominated American religious life, portrayed "Jewish nationalism and American values" as fully compatible.11
The goals and activities of America’s Puritan forefathers and Israel’s twentieth-century pioneers were seen as essentially the same.

As the twentieth century has progressed, demographic differences between Jews of Eastern European and Germanic descent have become less striking. As a result, all the religious movements of American Jewish life came to be “more and more like each other.”\(^{12}\) Changes within Reform were particularly striking. Children of Eastern European immigrants began to join Reform temples, bringing with them sympathetic attitudes toward Zionism. The leadership of Stephen S. Wise and Abba Hillel Silver, the establishment of the Jewish Institute of Religion in 1922, and the Columbus Platform formally approved by the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1937 meant that the inroads of Zionism among the Reform elite were considerable. Reform and modern Orthodox rabbis increasingly came to parallel their Conservative peers in fashioning a uniquely American form of the Zionist dream.

In short, Zionism in America evolved into a movement whose messages and meanings were congenial to the terms dictated by American society. It is not surprising that rabbis came to occupy a central role in the transmission of the Zionist vision to American Jews and gentiles alike. As Ben Halpern has argued, these men not only produced “the most thoroughly American variant of Zionism,” but they also succeed “in impressing [their] stamp upon American Jewry at large” because their brand of “cultural-spiritual” Zionism “filled the place allotted to the Jews as a religious community in the American scheme of things.”\(^{13}\)

This essay will examine a crucial decade in American Zionism: the years immediately prior to and after the establishment of the state. The portrait of American Zionist ideology that emerged in the 1940s will be drawn from an analysis of representative sermons and pamphlets delivered and written by both prominent and lesser-known rabbis. These genres are ideally suited for such a study, inasmuch as sermons and popular pamphlets, written and delivered by a religious leadership accorded a great deal of ascribed status by the American setting, were a major conduit for transmitting Zionist visions and values. We can assume that, in turn, these sources reflect the needs, values, and aspirations of the people to whom the rabbis preached. Since the rabbis, as well as the congregants whom
they addressed, were part of a common American universe of discourse, these sources will provide a picture of the Zionist beliefs and values that marked American Jewish society during this period. They reflect the Zionist idea in America as the broad majority of American Jews would have then understood it, an image of American Zionism that is still dominant in many American Jewish circles today.

Baruch Treiger, a 1933 ordinand of the Jewish Theological Seminary and rabbi of Agudath Achim Congregation in Orange, New Jersey, is representative of a Conservative rabbinate passionately devoted to transmitting the American Zionist message. In an address delivered on October 25, 1943, Treiger maintained that a commitment to Palestine lay at the heart of Judaism. Mindful of the genocide of European Jewry occurring while he spoke, Treiger recalled the positions put forth by Herzl, Nordau, and their successors among the political Zionists. No one could deny the legitimacy of their claims that Israel was absolutely essential to the Jew as a “land of refuge.” Yet he took exception to Nordau’s assertion that “Zionism is the result of . . . antisemitism.” Instead, claimed Treiger, “Zionism . . . has its roots in Jewish idealism even more than in Jewish suffering.”

In a tone akin to that of Schechter and Brandeis, Treiger proclaimed that the Jewish passion for justice was inextricably linked to the Zionist dream. Jewish idealism asserted “that the survival of the Jew as a fighter against injustice was bound up with the survival of his creative facilities,” which could be nourished only in the Land of Israel, “the national homeland for the Jewish people where the great Hebrew prophets preached the Unity of God and the brotherhood of man.” Zionism was not primarily a nationalistic movement but “part and parcel . . . of the ethical substance” that marks Judaism as a “religious civilization.”

Based upon a divine promise that God made to Abraham, a promise “animated by the highest ideas of justice,” this commitment to Zion as the land where the ethical genius of the Jewish people discovers its ultimate and most complete expression is found in every genre of Jewish literature. The purpose of Zionism, Treiger contended, was to return the Jewish people “unto the Land of Israel
to serve God as it befits a people of God.” Treiger approvingly quoted Rav Abraham Isaac Kook in his assertion that the work of the secular pioneers in Palestine must be understood in religious terms, thus wedding the moralism of American religious life to the particularity of Jewish attachment to the Land according to biblical and traditional rabbinic warrant.

Treiger went on to cite a midrash in Genesis Rabbah 1:21, where the academies of Shammai and Hillel are reported as having debated whether the heavens or the earth had been the first to be created. Ultimately, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai settled the debate by contending that “Sheneihem nivre’u yahdav—both were created at the same time.” This, Treiger said, is “the underlying philosophy of Zionism”: the Land of Israel is the place where the Jew will continue “to contribute [so much to] the religious life of all the world.” A notion of Jewish mission similar to that articulated by classical Reform rabbis of the nineteenth century was linked here to Jewish nationalism. In a series of talks and sermons delivered a few months later in January 1944, Treiger concluded a presentation entitled “This Is the Land,” “For from Zion will go forth the Torah, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem,” interpreting the verses from Isaiah in his prayer in the following manner: “May we hope that in our day Palestine will become the Jewish Commonwealth from whence justice and righteousness may once more radiate for mankind at large.”

The quest for normalization and the desire to be “like all the other nations” characteristic of large segments of political Zionism is here absent. Instead, the religious thrust and universalistic hopes attached to Zionism and the Jewish national idea are preeminent.

Rabbi Louis Levitsky, spiritual leader of Congregation Oheb Shalom in Newark, New Jersey, and president in 1943 of the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly, uttered sentiments akin to those of Treiger in “The Religious Spirit,” a pamphlet issued that same year. At the outset, Levitsky wrote, “no Jew who calls himself religious can fail to be a Zionist. Conversely, no Jew who claims to be an intelligent Zionist can be truly understanding in his profession of the cause unless he comprehends the primacy of the religious factor in Zionism.” Herzl notwithstanding, “Zionism is older than 1896. . . . We must not . . . forget that the rebuilding of Eretz Yis-
rael is not dependent upon bigger and better pogroms.” It is not sufficient “to be satisfied with Palestine as a haven of refuge for our persecuted people who have at present no other visible land to which they can apply for admission.” A political Zionism of completely secular dimensions is to be absolutely rejected. “Such secular Zionism,” Levitsky charged, “fails to realize the religious idealism upon which the whole structure of Jewish life, of which Palestine is an integral part, has been built.”

Levitsky pleaded, “We want Palestine as a place where Israel’s soul can be free and expand, and we can expect God’s help only when we can say to Him today, as our ancestors pleaded with Him anciently, ‘Return, O Lord, unto the tens of thousands of families of Israel.’” A “Godless Zionism” is oxymoronic, for the love of Zion “did not spring from the despair aroused by pogroms and the pains of the Cossack’s knout. It arose in the soul of a people expressed by its prophets, spread by its teachers who associated Palestine with the word redemption.” Once more, a purely cultural or political Zionism is rejected in favor of a religious vision imbued with the universal ethical and religious message of redemption for all humanity.

To make explicit the principle that “God can only be understood by and through the lives and deeds of men,” Levitsky addressed the “religious Jew”:

Eretz Yisrael is bound up with the eternity of God himself, and His reality is made manifest only as the Jew is able to realize, economically and socially, God’s Kingdom on earth. While these values must be extended to include the whole world, they emanate from one central point—the Holy Land. There is a “Jerusalem on high” which a religious Jew is obligated to duplicate on earth. The reality of a life in Palestine is one of the historical dogmas of the Jew, a Palestine made holy because of the lives of Jews and non-Jews who will people it.

Levitsky’s hopes for a rebuilt Jewish homeland, and his explicit inclusion of non-Jews within it, like Treiger’s, expresses the sense that the religious and ethical ideals of America and Judaism are thoroughly compatible.

Israel Levinthal, another prominent Conservative rabbi who served the Brooklyn Jewish Center for the greater part of his career,
presented a talk entitled “The Religion of Israel and the Land of Israel” on May 31, 1943. Like Treiger and Levitsky, Rabbi Levinthal produced numerous prooftexts to affirm the centrality of the Land in Jewish tradition. “Jewish religion,” he declared, cannot be separated “from the rebirth of Eretz Yisrael.” This unity between religion and land in Judaism meant that “there can be no conflict . . . between the spiritual values of religion and those of the Land of Israel. . . . We want the Jewish religion, we want to further the old Jewish prophetic ideas.” To do that “we need the land, the land that gave birth to . . . and saw the flowering of that prophetic religion, the land that has so much yet to contribute to the religious life of the entire world.” The prophets, visionaries who were seen as proclaiming the universal moral ideals and tasks for the Jewish people and all humanity, are placed at the heart of Levinthal’s description of a Judaism that incorporates Zion as a central component. The land is the conduit that will permit Israel to fulfill its universal messianic task to bring the “blessing of the heavens to fruition, realization, here on earth.”

Levinthal asserted that these universal themes, in keeping with the contours of American religiosity, are also “harmonious with the Four Freedoms” advanced by President Roosevelt. In the final part of his preaching, Levinthal undertook to speak directly to the “conscience of Christendom.” Not only would devout Christians support the rebirth of the Jewish state so that “the historic justice due to the Jewish people will be realized,” but they would do so because the Bible supplies the Jewish people with a divinely mandated right to the Land. When believing Jews and Christians “hear that the [British government’s anti-Zionist] White Paper has not yet been rescinded, we hear the command of God, kene lekha ha-sadeh, ‘buy the field’ (Jeremiah 32), ki lekha mishpat hage’ulah liknot, ‘for you have the right of redemption,’ the moral right . . . to redeem the land.” While philosophers routinely distinguish between religious and ethical warrants for an action, Levinthal here collapsed the two. The Jewish claim to the land is mandated by a commanding and ethical deity whom Jews and Christians alike recognize. Levinthal points to a Zionism he believed was enshrined as well in the mythology of a Christian America that recognized that Holy Scriptures granted the Jewish people a right to their
ancient homeland. His sermon reflects a dovetailing of the belief system of a Christian America and an American Zionism in the minds of Zionism's American adherents.

In the Midwest, Conservative rabbis such as Abraham Halpern of B'nai Amoona in St. Louis preached a similar vision. Speaking on April 24, 1948, the eve of the establishment of the State of Israel, Rabbi Halpern delivered a sermon the title of which employed Patrick Henry's words, "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death." Exhilarated by the happiness caused by the United Nations decision of November 29, 1947, to establish a Jewish state in Palestine, Halpern was distressed by what he saw as the lack of American resolve to support the yet-to-be-born Jewish state. Drawing upon the themes of Passover, Halpern queried his congregation, "Are we to shut out the light that appeared in the darkness of our day and bring the makas hoshech—the plague of darkness, on us and the rest of the world? This is what happened in ancient Egypt when a whole people was enslaved." Is America, like the new Pharaoh of old "who knew not Joseph," about to abandon and betray the Jews?

Halpern indicated to his listeners that Zionism embodies the lesson of Passover. "The world needs to learn continually the meaning of the Festival of Freedom, and it is the task of the Jew to teach the world that freedom is the basic idea for human happiness. . . . We lose sight of the fact that the whole Pesach festival is to keep alive this essential social ideal for man, namely liberty and freedom and the right of self-expression by all the children of God." The progressive and humanistic political agenda associated with the liberal ideal is seen by Halpern, as by his colleagues cited above, as being embodied in the building of a Jewish state. "We began our march throughout the ages speaking in the name of our God that we must proclaim liberty in all the land to all the inhabitants thereof." In performing this divinely commanded mission, the Jew causes all humanity, Jew and gentile alike, "to reach upward and take hold of the hand of God." The Jewish ideal of "justice and righteousness, of equality and freedom" is manifest in "the courage of the Jew of Palestine." It is an ideal found in the Magna Carta, at Concord and Valley Forge, and in the speeches of Patrick Henry. It is contained in the work of those who fought to free the slaves during the Civil War, those who gave their lives in World War I to
make the world safe for democracy, and the American and Allied soldiers who fought and died to thwart Hitler in World War II.

Halpern's sermon not only cloaked Zionism in the robes of American democracy and equality but also provided religious warrants for both. The rebuilding of the Jewish state represented "a great hope for the realization of our ideals and through which the Jew might again bring light to the world, so that it be said of him as it was in the days of Pharaoh, 'And to all the children there was light in their dwellings.' . . . The celebration of Pesach was to stir within us the urge to demand freedom not only for ourselves, but for all the children of God." The Jewish state is a particularistic manifestation of the mission mandated by God for Israel and, through Israel, all humanity. Israel does not contest universalistic religious teachings; it is religious expression of a universal divine ideal. Zionist identity coincides with the religious and moral heritage of America and reinforces both. Halpern's sermon reflected the contours the United States created for Judaism and also expressed the high degree to which Jewish religious leaders had internalized its strictures in defining their Zionism.

While Conservatism perhaps played the most prominent role in the transmission and depiction of Zionism to a majority of Americans, prominent Orthodox rabbis sympathetic to the Zionist cause drew similar portraits. David de Sola Pool, for example, the eminent rabbi of Sephardic Congregation Shearith Israel in New York and a former president of the Synagogue Council of America, in a 1943 essay entitled "Substance and Spirit," criticized those "Zionists who would live solely as a racial relic, as a national remnant, ignoring the Judaism which alone gave them birth and made it possible for them to be Jews. . . . The Zionist who could cut himself away from his religious roots is trying to preserve a container emptied of the precious contents which gave it value." As an Orthodox Jew committed to the Zionist enterprise, it was impossible for Rabbi de Sola Pool to envision Zionism apart from its religious roots. His vision of the religious character of Zionism, however, also bore a strong affinity to America's view of Judaism and the Zionist enterprise. When he asserted that only Zion could permit Judaism "to enrich universal religion with its own unique values," there is a
moralism as evident here as in the writings of the Conservative rabbis.

Joseph Lookstein, a leader of the Mizrachi (Orthodox Zionist) movement and rabbi of Kehilath Jeshurun on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, evidenced the same perceptions even more strongly, perhaps, also in a 1943 essay, "The Religious Character of Jewish Nationalism." Lookstein maintained at the outset of his paper that Herzl, the arch-secularist, had held the view implicitly "that a return to Zion must be preceded by a return to Judaism." Lookstein took the well-known aphorism of David Ben-Gurion, "The Balfour Declaration is not our Torah; the Torah is our Balfour Declaration," to imply that Ben-Gurion saw the Bible as giving a divine, not a secular nationalist sanction to the Jewish yearning for return to Eretz Yisrael. The creation of a religious Ben-Gurion out of the secularist, like that of a religious Herzl, is as much the result of an American vision of Zionism as of Lookstein's own Orthodox background and beliefs. Like the non-Orthodox rabbis, he defended Zionism as part of the Jewish mission. Zionists, he wrote, "are accused of loving humanity less because we love Judaism more. We are indicted on the count that our nationalism contradicts the essential universalism of our religion. Even our prophets are summoned to testify against us." Such a reading of Jewish tradition, Lookstein averred, is a distortion. As the prophet Isaiah recognized, in Judaism there is "no contradiction between universalism and nationalism. Isaiah, the prophet of universal peace and brotherhood, might be considered the forerunner of the ideal toward which our generation is striving: . . . the integration of the peoples of the world into a family of nations under the fatherhood of God."

Modern Orthodox rabbinic proponents of American Zionism did insist on the role of halakhah in the Zionist enterprise, which distinguished their Zionism from that of their more liberal colleagues. Paradigmatic of the tenor of these sermons is "Sinai Speaks to Israel," delivered by Rabbi Morris Max, executive vice-president of the Rabbinical Council of America, on the festival of Shavuot, in 1949, one year after the State was born. Max began by proclaiming that "the principal source of strength" for the Jewish people, even in their darkest hours of Egyptian slavery, was their hope and desire that they could establish and dwell in a homeland. Yet, even then,
the people understood that this national life was contingent upon their acceptance of Torah "as the basis of the new life they were about to create." A committed Zionist, Max applauded the creation of the new Jewish state and the reestablishment of Jewish national life in Israel's ancient land, but, as an Orthodox rabbi, he insisted that "the Torah [should serve] as the basis of the new Jewish State." 25

Max cited a well-known talmudic passage (Kiddushin 68) that stated that when God revealed the Torah to the people Israel, the Divine held the mountain over the people's heads and told them, "If you accept the Torah, it shall be well with you, and if not, your burial place shall be there." This midrash is often seen as embodying a heteronomous ethic, inasmuch as God coerced Israel into accepting the Law. Max contended that in these "words of our sages," God, as it were, was saying to the people Israel, "If you will accept the Torah and create a divine culture of your own—your own unique standards of justice and righteousness as set down by God, then you will fare well in the Promised Land. . . . Nationhood alone will not give you the strength to create a new way of life and a new ideal that will withstand all the vicissitudes of national life." Max recognized a secular Zionism distinct from the religiosity of his own vision, but he affirmed that the Torah was the embodiment of the American democratic values of "justice and righteousness." Inasmuch as "the foundations of American democracy," Max observed, "were 'cemented with Hebraic mortar,' surely we should not hesitate to establish the first true Democracy in the Near East—our own State of Israel—on the foundations of the Torah, . . . 'the most democratic book in the world.'" He concluded, "Blaze a new trail in the field of democratic society and government by making Israel a dynamic living state enriched by the living waters of our divine Torah." While the sentiment possessed a tenor distinct from that of other rabbis surveyed, Max's identification of Torah and religious law with American democracy revealed once more the power of American culture to shape the Zionist vision even of the Orthodox rabbinate in America. Like his rabbinic peers, Max championed a traditionally religious Zionism in terms congenial to American spiritual-democratic values.

Max's close friend and colleague, Rabbi Israel Tabak of Shaarei
Zion Congregation in Baltimore, delivered a sermon in defense and support of Israel on April 10, 1949, on the “Church of the Air of the Columbia Broadcasting System.” Entitled “Liberty versus Security” and intended for a gentle as well as Jewish audience, it reflected the transdenominational as well as religious democratic vision of Zionism that had emerged at this time. Like Halpern one year earlier, in this Passover sermon Tabak drew upon the history of the American struggle for freedom to interpret the meaning of Zionism for his audience. “The American system teaches that liberty is the greatest human good and is to be cherished and treasured above all other human wants.” There is a confluence, Tabak maintained, between American and Jewish values, for the teaching of Passover is that “the lessons of liberty must remain fresh in mankind’s memory.”

Tabak went on to assert that the liberation of Israel from Egyptian bondage portrays two types of men. One type, like Patrick Henry, who proclaimed “Give me liberty or give me death,” consisted of those who “risked their lives and invited the wrath of Egyptian taskmasters by fearlessly insisting upon their liberty.” The other consisted of those who “constantly reproached Moses for having liberated them, looking back with longing to the life in Egypt ‘when we sat by the fleshpots, and when we did eat bread to the full.’” Tabak asserted that genuine servants of “the living God” could not “wear the chains of slavery. God-intoxicated men of all creeds possess the same passion for freedom. Abraham Lincoln, the great Emancipator, once said, ‘As I would not be a slave—so I would not be a master.’” Drawing upon parallels between the American experience and the Jewish heritage, Tabak favorably compared this sentiment to the story told in the Book of Judges about Gideon, who would only select troops for his “army of liberation” from those who drank water from the brook standing upright—like free people. “This is the ideal of free men in a free society. This is the true spirit of America.” Tabak then applied this to the State of Israel:

The people of Israel will forever be grateful to the United States, for the friendship and sense of righteousness with which [Americans] have supported them in the hour of their greatest need. But the establishment of the Jewish state would never have been possible
without the superhuman courage and the endless sacrifices they
themselves offered for their independence. Had they placed material
security ahead of liberty, there would have been no problem. The
British and the Arabs were ready to grant them anything short of
independence, but the modern Israelites, like their ancient ancestors
and like the American revolutionaries two centuries earlier, cherish
their liberty above all worldly goods, and prefer "the bread of afflic-
tion" . . . to the "flesh pots" of Egypt . . . . It is no wonder . . . that
the founding fathers of this country looked to the story of the Exodus
for inspiration in their struggle for independence.

Tabak's sermon, like Halpern's, cloaks the Jewish state and its
founders in the robes of American freedom. It provides Jewish
sources for American ideals and makes Zionism the incarnation of
the highest spiritual values of American civilization. Modern Israel,
like ancient Israel, will be a wellspring of inspiration for freedom-
loving peoples everywhere, a democratic model for nations through-
out the world. His sermon, like the others examined in this essay,
demonstrates how the United States had created a framework for
the interpretation of Judaism, and how rabbis such as Tabak em-
ployed that framework to explain Zionism both to themselves and
to an American audience composed of Jews and gentiles.

Rabbis such as Louis I. Newman of New York, Felix Levy of Chi-
cago, and Max Nussbaum of Los Angeles are representative of the
ever-increasing inroads Zionism was beginning to make among Re-
form rabbis at this time. These men shared a vision of Zionism that
made them virtually indistinguishable from their more traditional
rabbinic colleagues, though they were aware of an active anti-
Zionist party within the Reform camp. Newman, the scholarly and
powerful spiritual leader of Congregation Rodeph Sholom in Man-
hattan, delivered a brief for Zionism entitled "Palestine plus the
Diaspora" on November 18, 1947, less than two weeks before the
United Nations voted for the partition of Palestine. In this speech,
he affirmed the religious-cultural brand of Zionism that had marked
the American movement throughout its history. "Our relationship
to the 'medinah Yehudit,'" he proclaimed, "will be a cultural,
spiritual, communal, philanthropic, and brotherly relationship." 
Israel, he was certain, was "destined to exert an enriching and
vitalizing influence upon American Judaism, and upon Judaism
throughout the nations," because "great spiritual truths are being formulated and enunciated [there]."

Like the rabbis cited above, Newman refused to concede that there was a nonreligious Zionism, calling the pioneer builders of the land "so-called secularists" who were, in fact, "laboring for a revival of Prophetic Judaism." By viewing them in this way, Newman, like other American rabbis, was defining the Zionist enterprise in light of his own beliefs as an American Jew. Furthermore, as a Reform rabbi, he was conscious of the Reform critique of the movement's nonreligious character. Thus, he asserted, "Regarding the Mission of Israel—a theme so dear to the heart of Reform Jews—the Hebrew writers of Palestine have written with grandeur and insight." Religious and cultural creativity would "flow" from the Jewish state so that the voice of "the spiritual ideals" of the Jewish people would find expression for all humanity. In this way, the "lessons of the Hebraic legacy" could be applied "to the events of the hour." The Jewish people outside the Land would receive "religious nurture," Newman confidently predicted, "from the new Hebraism of Zion."

The genocidal fury unleashed by Hitler in his war against the Jews made political Zionism and the establishment of the Jewish state a moral imperative. Eleven days earlier, on November 7, 1947, Newman had delivered a sermon at Rodeph Sholom on "Our American Citizenship and the New Jewish State."28 He began with a strong attack on those who opposed the creation of the Third Jewish Commonwealth on the grounds that "the creation of a Jewish State in Zion will imperil the status of Jews in countries outside of Palestine." Such people "fought Herzl . . . fifty years ago . . . [and many] have died in Hitler's Extermination Camps—they or their descendants who have echoed their fears. It is unnecessary to pay any . . . attention to the contemporary heirs of this preaching." The need for Israel as a Jewish "land of refuge" was undeniable. While "most American Jewish youth will remain in the United States," the State would alleviate the deep distress of a majority of the Jewish people who were unable to experience the privileged prosperity of American Jews.

Newman was confident that Israel "will be a democracy in the best sense of that term. . . . The civil and religious rights of all
individuals . . . will be . . . safeguarded.” Newman labeled those Jews who opposed the creation of the State “anti-Zionist assimilationists.” Israel would be the vehicle that would permit the Jews, “an international people,” to “cement the ties of brotherhood between all nations.” In the State of Israel, the spiritual talents of the people of Israel would be liberated. “The artists, the poet, the religious leader and teacher, the sage and the prophet can once again influence the world for blessing and for light.” Israel, he concluded, represents “the harbinger of the Messianic days in our own time.” The depth of feeling evidenced in Newman’s preachments is palpable.

Max Nussbaum had been an active Zionist while serving as rabbi in Berlin, Germany; he was called to the pulpit of Temple Israel of Hollywood, California, in 1942. The active role he played in the Zionist movement in the United States reflects the urgency and concern of his own personal experience as well as a Zionist vision nurtured and informed by the cultural Zionism of Ahad Ha-Am. In an article written for the Congress Weekly in 1942 entitled “Under Hitler,” Nussbaum praised Zionist leaders in Germany for their foresight. Unlike other German Jewish leaders, “the assimilationists” who “still believed in a very brief existence of the Hitler government,” the Zionists “recognized the danger” and promoted a program of “cultural autonomy” that fortified the morale of German Jewry during its darkest hour. Through active encouragement of immigration to Palestine, the German Zionist movement managed to save over sixty thousand Jewish souls. “More than that,” Nussbaum concluded, “it touched into flame the concealed spark of Jewish national dignity within the hearts of thousands of German Jews who are now scattered all over the world. As always in Jewish history, one remnant finds its way home, physically or spiritually. This is what Zionism achieved in that period of agony: the She‘ar Jashuv.”

Almost a decade later, in a sermon entitled “Israel—The Career of a Name,” Rabbi Nussbaum takes as his starting point the word “Israel,” which, hallowed by thousands of years of tradition, “came to mean excellency of character, religious devotion, and the quality of spiritual values.” “Israel” bespeaks the “spiritual aristocracy” and mission of the Jewish people, “which denotes both the spiritual,
religious, and ethical values for which Judaism stands, as well as the idea of noblesse oblige” that compels the Jewish people “to give an ethical example to the whole of mankind.” The term reflects the Jewish people’s obligation to “serve as a means by which other people may be led to the light.”

Expressing the humane qualities that characterize the Jewish people, as well as the people’s special relationship with God, the name Israel cannot be divested of “religious significance.” According to Nussbaum, the founders of the Jewish state appropriately selected this name when they established a political homeland for the Jews in the contemporary world. “When Herzl wrote his famous book on Zionism,” Nussbaum observed, “he called it Judenstaat and the Hebrew translator rendered it Medinat Hayehudim, ‘State of Jews.’” Herzl’s aim was to restore the name “Jew” to a place of dignity.

However, the founders of the new Jewish State, after much consideration . . . on the selection of a proper name, came up unanimously with the choice of Israel, thus again emphasizing the spiritual quality of our people, its conception of humanity, and its relationship with God. . . . The young Jewish State of today is not only an aggregation of Yehudim defending themselves against their enemies, . . . but the Land of Israel from which will again come forth the Torah and the word of God, a new conception of humanity, and a new message to a troubled world.

Hitler and the plague of modern antisemitism made the political dimension of Zionism an imperative, but Hitler could not deflect Israel and Zion from the fulfillment of their universal task. Once again, the Western and American vision of the meaning and significance of the Jewish state is apparent.

In a 1943 article, “Zionism: A Religious Duty,” Felix Levy, rabbi of Emanuel Congregation in Chicago and president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, began, “We are a religious nation. . . . The Jew never thought of religion apart from his people, as the doctrines of election, mission, and messianism attest.” 31 While other classical Reform rabbis would undoubtedly have disputed this assessment, Levy, as a leader of the Reform rabbinate, was expressing views shared by most of his Reform colleagues at this point. Levy maintained that “we liberal Jews. . . . see in Zion the opportu-
nity for the grandest kind of [universal] Jewish self-expression.” In an ironic twist, Levy even cited Kaufmann Kohler to rebut the claim of the anti-Zionists remaining in the Reform camp. (Kohler’s antipathy to Zionism was so great that, as president of the Hebrew Union College, he purged the HUC faculty of all persons sympathetic to the Zionist cause and had forbidden the teaching of modern Hebrew literature in the curriculum of the College.) Levy’s citation of Kohler in support of the Zionist idea, whatever its historical accuracy, was meant to be an effective rhetorical device.

Levy insisted that “Zionism, let it be repeated again, is not an exclusively political movement. It is from one point of view an end; from a larger and truer survey it is the means for Jewish survival, not as a nation in the accepted sense of the term, but as God’s people who through and in Zion can better perform a great task.” Levy stated in conclusion, “There is far more universalism among the Jews in Palestine than there is anywhere else in the world.” Once more, the claim is put forth that the particularity of Jewish nationalism and the demands of a prophetic universalism do not clash. The former becomes the means whereby the ideals of the latter can be best realized.

Like Newman and some of his Orthodox and Conservative colleagues, Levy was sensitive to accusations of “irreligiosity” hurled against the Zionist movement and acknowledged their partial truth. “Unfortunately,” he wrote, “some Zionists and some leaders of Zionism have been anti-religious and this charge, in so far as it is true, is deserved. We have, however, another instance in the development of what in its Herzlian phase was perhaps an exclusively secular interpretation of Judaism, metoch shelo lishma ba lishma.” Unlike Lookstein or Newman, Levy had no need to convert Herzl or the secular Zionists to religion, but he had the same desire to view Zionism as a distinctly religious expression of Judaism. “Anyone who reads the contemporary literature of the homeland realizes that the spirit of God is hovering over Eretz Yisrael.” Zionism is a movement, Levy proclaimed in conclusion, “imbued by the highest religious, yes universalistic ideal.”

This survey of representative rabbinic writings on Zionism during the 1940s bears out Friesel’s and Ben Halpern’s contention that a
strong link between religion and Zionism has been a hallmark of the American movement. Indeed, there was virtually an identity of postures toward Zionism adopted by rabbis in each of the movements. Each viewed Zionism in religious and moralistic terms and sought to downplay the exclusively ethnic or secular nationalist elements that characterized the movement in Europe. The key role these rabbis played in transmitting the Zionist message to Jews and non-Jews alike distinguished the American branch of the movement. This desire, as well as the content of this rabbinic message, aptly reflected the American environment that led Jew and gentile to define Judaism in essentially religious terms by the 1940s. The force of the Zionist model these men held was so attuned to the pulse of America that, over forty years later, its visions still resonate among many American Jews. It is this linkage between religion, morality, and Zionism, in large measure, that leads to the criticisms significant numbers of American Jews hurl at some contemporary Israeli policies. That, however, is another topic. The reader should simply note the potency of the cultural and spiritual model of Zionism these rabbis framed, as well as the American context that contributed so substantively to its creation.

Notes

1. I would like to thank my colleagues Steve Zipperstein and Stanley Chyet for their help in conceptualizing this paper. I also acknowledge the support of Kevin Proffitt of the American Jewish Archives in locating many of the sources employed in this study.
3. Ibid., 203.
5. As quoted in Herberg, Protestant, Catholic, Jew, 205.
8. Ibid., 492–93.


15. Taken from Baruch I. Treiger Papers, American Jewish Archives, Manuscript Collection No. 244: Box 2, Folder 6, "The Religious Aspects of Zionism." All quotations taken from Treiger are found in this manuscript collection.

16. This particular sentence is taken from Treiger's "The Romance of Zionism." Other quotations in this paragraph are taken from his "The Religious Aspects of Zionism."


18. Treiger, "The Romance of Zionism."


20. Levinthal, 143–49. All Levinthal's quotations are taken from this address.


25. Leo Jung, the famed rabbi of the Jewish Center of Manhattan and professor of ethics at Yeshiva University, offered a similar and representative Orthodox viewpoint concerning the contemporary State of Israel in his "The Creative Impulse of the Mitzvoth," in Leo Jung, *The Rhythm of Life: Sermons, Studies, Addresses* (New York: Pardes, 1950), 165–78.
32. The Hebrew phrase literally means, “That which did not spring originally from a selfless motive ultimately comes to embody one.” Levy’s point is that while Zionism, particularly in its political dimensions, was originally informed by secular concerns, it eventually came to embrace religious motives.