A POLITICAL CIRCLE
BRIT SHALOM

Any report about intellectual life in Palestine must necessarily be fragmented and divided, like the intellectual life of Palestine itself. There is hardly any other place in the world where the residents live so thoroughly divided into groups, large and small, as Palestine, and there is no place where people know so little about one another. . . . Almost every household is world unto itself, and certainly every religion, every group from a shared country of origin. For years people among us have been speaking about drawing closer to the Arabs. They forget that for that purpose the most primitive foundation is lacking: a common language, and also only the possibility of meeting one another.

SHMUEL HUGO BERGMANN, “GEISTIGES LEBEN”

The Association

A small advertisement was published in April 1926 in the Jerusalem daily newspaper, Doar Hayom, and a short time later in the German Zionist magazine, Jüdische Rundschau. It was signed by five men, most of whom—including Ye-hoshua Radler-Feldman (known as Rabbi Binyamin), Shmuel Hugo Bergmann, and Gershom Scholem—were members of the Brit Shalom association, which had recently been established. The advertisement contained a short statement opposing a demand that the Revisionist movement had been voicing for years, and that had shortly before been granted by the British government—that a Jewish armed force should be created in the Land of Israel:

With great sorrow we see that governments and nations continue to choose security in weapons over security by the creation of just and friendly relations, and that they value armament over raising the cultural and economic level of the masses. In our opinion, armament and feelings of mistrust and fear not only cannot protect against wars, but they create them. Our outlook, in accordance with the spiritual aspirations
of the Prophets of Israel, is that all of our efforts must be directed at uprooting from ourselves the military spirit and illusions promulgated in the name of the concepts of heroism and national pride.\(^2\)

The government directive for the establishment of a Hebrew brigade—accompanied by a propaganda campaign waged by men of the Yishuv that, in the opinion of the advertisement’s signers, contained distortion of the facts as well as “an address to the instincts of fear and national prestige”—created discrimination by excluding the Palestinian Arabs from this public service and caused tension between the nations. For these reasons, the signers “oppose[d] the creation of a Hebrew brigade for whatever reasons there may be” and demanded that the directive be canceled immediately.\(^3\) This was Scholem’s first public statement as part of Brit Shalom, the only organization with a declared political orientation that Scholem belonged to during his years in Mandatory Palestine.

Officially Brit Shalom was established in March 1926, though it had existed as a social club since the end of 1925. The founder of the association was Arthur Ruppin, who was its chairman until 1928. Other early members included Bergmann, Rabbi Binyamin, Chaim Margaliot Kalvarisky, Jacob Tahon, Joseph Lurie, Hans Kohn, and, of course, Gershom Scholem. In addition, Robert Welsch and Georg Landauer were active members of the association in Germany, the former as the editor of Jüdische Rundschau, and the latter as the first director of the Palestine Bureau (Palästinaamt), the German branch of the Jewish Agency for Israel.\(^4\) The purpose of the association, as its members declared in the first volume of its magazine, Shefoteinu (Our aspirations), was “to pave the way for understanding between Jews and Arabs for forms of common life in the Land of Israel on the basis of complete equality of the political rights of both nations, with broad autonomy, and the forms of their common work for the benefit of the development of the country.”\(^5\) The association was intended to be solely a research organization, and its activities were carried out within the framework of the Zionist movement and in coordination with the Zionist leadership of the Yishuv. The association never had more than a few score members.\(^6\) Almost all of them were Zionist intellectuals, but they differed vastly in their origins and their thinking, which makes it difficult to speak of Brit Shalom as a single homogeneous group.\(^7\) The spiritual richness of each member led to a profusion of opinions in the association.

Aharon Kedar divided the association into two main groups. The first, which he called, “People of the Yishuv,” was composed of Zionist intellectuals who had immigrated to Palestine in the early twentieth century, most of them from Eastern Europe, and their Zionism was chiefly political and pragmatic, although
it had an aspect of personal fulfillment. Kedar’s second group, the “Radical Group,” was composed of intellectuals from Central Europe, and most of them were associated with the Hebrew University. This group included Bergmann, Kohn, Weltsch, Landauer, Shmuel Sambursky, Marcus Reiner, Ernst Simon, and Scholem.8 This group was called radical because of their willingness to go farther than the other group in the effort to combine Jewish national aspirations with those of the Arabs, while recognizing the importance of ethical issues in building up the land. In fact, the ideas that characterized the activity of the members of this circle had been consolidated while they were still in Europe, and they had been influenced by the spiritual and intellectual climate in German-speaking Europe from around 1900 until the Weimar era. The political trends that characterized German Zionism at that time provided the background for the views of the members of this circle, the spiritual trends that influenced Zionist youth at that time, and the Central European spirit of Bildung and the advocacy of the members of the circle of moderate liberalism.9

Scholem’s published and unpublished writings from that time show that the ideas of the members of the radical circle were largely consistent with the way he believed the so-called Arab question should be solved and his understanding of its centrality for the fulfillment of Zionism. Through an examination of Scholem’s activity in Brit Shalom during its existence (1926–33) and of his writings from that time, it is possible to arrive at a better understanding of his conception of Zionism as a personal attempt to realize his own Zionist utopia, as that had taken shape in his heart while he was still a youth in Germany.

The Utopia

Scholem’s attraction to Zionism and Zion as a youth was influenced by the spiritual Zionism of Ahad Haam and the idea of a spiritual center that came from his school of thought. The essence of this approach is the idea that the central problem of Judaism was cultural, and therefore a territorial and political solution as proposed by Theodor Herzl—a Jewish state alone—could not supply an answer to the Jewish question. According to Ahad Haam, a small spiritual center needed to be established in the Land of Israel as a first stage, and over the years, it would become the center of the Jewish people and create conditions in Palestine favorable for the spiritual development of Judaism and the future establishment of a state with Jewish cultural content—not an organization of Palestine on an ethnic basis. In Ahad Haam’s words, the purpose was to create “not merely a State of Jews but a truly Jewish State.”10 The future of the Jewish people depended, according to this approach, on cultural rather than political
development. The spiritual center in the Land of Israel was meant to ensure the existence and perpetuity of Judaism itself, to be a firm foundation from which the Judaism of the Diaspora could receive its spiritual fare and a guarantee of its continuity. This small and high-quality center was also meant to be an ethical model for the entire Jewish people, and by virtue of this task it would also be in close contact with the Jews of the Diaspora, which was its periphery.

The young Scholem compared Ahad Haam to Martin Buber. The charismatic figure of Buber aroused great enthusiasm in Scholem’s heart as a youth, as was the case with many other members of his generation. But during World War I and in the light of Buber’s support for the war, this enthusiasm became sharp criticism. Accordingly, the comparison that Scholem made between Buber and Ahad Haam emphasized Buber’s importance in Scholem’s early years. Thus, for example, in his opening speech at an evening devoted to a discussion of Buber in the Jung-Juda youth movement in January 1915, Scholem placed Buber alongside Ahad Haam as two of the most important and spiritually powerful men in Judaism.

About a year and a half later, he contrasted them instead of comparing them. For Scholem, Buber had come to represent the negative side of German Jewry and the Zionist youth movement, which—because of Buber’s influence—held the concept of experience (Erlebnis) in high esteem. In contrast, Ahad Haam symbolized the “true” spirit of Zionism, whose source was in Eastern Europe: “It is really and truly good that in Russia the greatest man is not Buber, but Ahad Haam, who does not speak of ‘experience’ at all, but of spirit. The Jews of Germany will be left far from Zion so long as they remain in Heppenheim [Buber’s home in Germany since March 1916].” For Scholem, Ahad Haam and his teachings represented the positive and “authentic” model of Eastern European Zionism, and Buber and his advocacy of “experience” represented the negative model of the German Zionists. Indeed, at this point Scholem’s view of Buber was more negative than positive. “I was greatly impressed with Buber, but eventually I defined myself as an adherent of Ahad Haam,” he wrote in his memoirs many years later. “It was his great moral seriousness that won me over.” At the same time, one should not underestimate Buber’s influence on Scholem on other levels, which were connected to the idea of experience. I refer to the Buberian conception, which was influenced by Ahad Haam and regarded Zionism—that is, the way toward Zion—as a personal quest for fulfillment or actualization, in the background of which stands a personal and ethical decision. Buber’s famous three lectures on Judaism to the Bar-Kokhba circle in Prague—from whose ranks came many members of the radical circle of Brit Shalom—profoundly influenced the Zionist youth of Scholem’s generation. These speeches were published in 1911 and were a systematic working out of the Orientalist tendencies...
that characterized Buber’s attitude toward Zionism. This appears to have been one of the central points where Buber made his mark on Scholem’s Zionism.

As noted, Scholem’s yearning for and attraction to the Orient had their roots in the spirit of the time of his youth in Berlin. These feelings, which are expressed in many places in his early diaries, have been discussed several times by scholars in the context of the establishment of Kabbalah as a field of academic study in the Hebrew University by Scholem and his students, or in the context of postcolonial Orientalist discourse, and mainly with the aim of linking the first context to the second. Common to these discussions is the claim that Scholem arrived in the Orient as a representative of Western culture and with no real desire to assimilate into the Orient; instead, he wanted to remain in Western contexts. The kernel of these arguments is Scholem’s allegedly ambivalent attitude toward the Orient, which is based on simultaneous feelings of “admiration and repulsion,” while Scholem is taking from the Orient—which is presented as the source of “authentic knowledge”—the raw material needed to construct an essentially Western worldview that ignores the “true” context of that knowledge. According to this conception, “the Orient is both the source of the ‘knowledge’ and also the source of the apocalyptic danger, and the knowledge must be distanced from that danger—that is to say, the Orient itself—by setting it in the West as ‘redemption.’”

I am not convinced that the Orientalist perspective, which comes from postcolonial discourse and presents a dichotomy between the Orient and the Occident, is useful for understanding Scholem, his research, and the ideological background of his Zionism. Close examination of the sources gives rise to a far more nuanced picture, according to which Scholem was aware of the dangers inherent in Orientalism and kept them separate from his love and desire for the Orient. In the spirit of the times, many entries in his early diaries identify the Jewish people and the Land of Israel with the Orient, thus linking the desire for the East with his Zionism. These entries were written in his youth, when Buber’s influence on him was great. This influence is clearly evident in Scholem’s conception of the Orient at that time, most of which he worked out in his personal struggle with Buber’s teachings, his image, and his meaning for the members of Scholem’s generation. Thus, for example, on December 11, 1915—shortly before his first visit to Buber, at the time when his critique of Buber’s path in Zionism and his influence on the Jewish youth movements began to take shape—he wrote in his diary:

Do I, Gerhard Scholem, have a desire for Palestine? Do I have the right and also—in my inner self—the obligation to go there? This is a hard question, and each of us
ought to have answered it in fact with a decisive “yes.” It is clear. I want to leave this place, but do I not want, [in] the same degree, to travel to Arabian countries, to Persia, to China, to the East? There is great love for the Orient within me, and I believe that the Land of Israel can celebrate its rebirth only in a covenant with the other Orient. But at the same time I certainly think that, while I wish to travel to the Orient, I want to live in the Land of Israel! That is the difference. I don’t want to go in order to see Jerusalem, about which one may speak without shame, but I want to become a son of the old earth and a citizen of the future.21

In this passage Scholem places the Land of Israel and his desire to live there in the general context of the Orient, and he feels attracted to all of it. However, he brings out the uniqueness of Zion in relation to other countries in the East. Although in his view Zion can come to life again only in the framework of the Orient, the difference between the Land of Israel and the various other countries is clear: while the other countries arouse in him the desire to tour them, because of their exotic attraction, the Land of Israel is the only place to which he wishes to belong and where he wants to live. For the young Scholem it was also clear that Jewish renewal in the East, which will lead him to become “a son of the old earth and a citizen of the future,” will also demand sacrifice, to make Western Zionism appropriate to the patterns of life in the place for which he yearns. The sacrifice, in Scholem’s opinion, will be none other than his commitment to Western scholarship, to which he planned to devote his life: “If the sacrifice of science is demanded, to serve the renewal of the East within the spirit of the East, then there will be nothing to be said against that.”22 The sacrifice, according to Scholem’s theoretical reflections here, is to give up intellectual life and become a tiller of the soil.

Scholem’s awareness of the contradiction between his desire to become a man of the Orient and his attachment to Western culture and scholarship testifies to the complex and self-aware thought processes that accompanied his becoming a Zionist and moving to the Land of Israel. The utopia that he imagined was not a picture devoid of all Oriental elements or containing only Oriental elements that were adapted to meet the needs of the West (though it must be pointed out that the ideal of working the land, which Scholem presented here, is also rooted in the European West and not in the Orient). What is important is that this utopia contained the unknown, leading to apprehensions about the future in the Land of Israel and a consideration of the dangers inherent in the passage from West to East. One of the central dangers in Scholem’s view was that the passage to the East would not be complete, and that the eyes of those in the center in Zion, including Scholem, would always look to the West: “Were I not to go to
Palestine, I would become a hypocrite of the first order here. By the way, in Palestine this possibility continues to exist: it depends on the people there, whether they glance in the direction of Europe, with two eyes, or to the East. I glance to the East. But in fact, I am not glancing. Rather, I am looking, I hope, I am burning.”

The rebirth of Zion, as Scholem imagined it before moving there, was meant to be in connection with the context of the Orient. Gazing from the East back to Europe seemed hypocritical to him, just as remaining in Europe did. This statement is consistent with the ethical conception that underlay Scholem’s Zionism, through the influence of Ahad Haam. The Zionist decision to immigrate to the Land of Israel was a personal one whose motives were ethical, and it was incumbent on the handful of people who would build the spiritual center in the Land of Israel to be a model for the rest of the nation in their moral purity and creative life. Of course, during the process of realizing utopia, it became clear that many of its elements could not be implemented. For example, the idea of a center implied a system of relations with the periphery and therefore constant connection with the West, and any person who uproots himself or herself from one world and moves into another encounters difficulties, which the young Scholem certainly did not anticipate fully. The reasons why Scholem chose to continue to pursue Western scholarship and gave up on the idea of a life on the soil—which he regarded in the passage quoted above as the solution to the paradox of Western existence in the Orient—belong to an area beyond the reach of the historian. However, it is important that Scholem’s diary entries clearly show that he was aware of the tension between East and West and the complexity of Zion as the point of encounter between them. In addition, we may also emphasize Scholem’s decision to learn Arabic as part of his preparation for immigration. Evidence of those studies is clear in the many books of Arabic grammar that he brought with him to the Land of Israel.

In his utopian vision of the actualization of the Zionist idea in the Land of Israel, Scholem thus followed Ahad Haam’s path. The idea of the spiritual center and the great emphasis given to ethics and individualism are important components of Scholem’s Zionist background. The process of implementing Ahad Haam’s ideas in the Land of Israel required coping with internal and external obstacles. Most important and, in the view of the members of Brit Shalom, the greatest test of Zionism, was an external obstacle: the relationship of Zionism to the Arabs and the inclusion of their needs in the Jewish national vision in an egalitarian and just manner. The internal challenge was coping with the Revisionist movement and its demand for Jewish exclusiveness, or at least a Jewish majority, in the country. As shown below, Scholem regarded this demand, which
was based on Herzl’s idea of a territorial solution, as a dangerous and potentially destructive extension of messianic aspirations.

**The Fulfillment**

In his letter to Werner Kraft, cited at the beginning of the previous chapter, Scholem drew an ambigious picture of the spiritual condition of people in the Land of Israel in late 1924, about a year after his immigration. As mentioned above, Scholem’s understanding of the reality into which he had immigrated was directly connected to his expectations of the country and the role he accorded it in the process of revival of the Jewish people—or, in other words, the way he saw Zionist politics. His complaints in the letter to Kraft about the situation of the Hebrew language in the country and about the quality of the intellectuals who wrote in it were repeated in much of what he wrote at that time and occupied a central place in his thinking and political positions. In the following passage, written at the same time as the letter to Kraft and similar to that letter in content, Scholem compares these aspects of Jewish national revival with trends in the Zionist movement in the Land of Israel:

Zionism will survive its catastrophe. The hour has come when hearts must decide whether Zionism—whose meaning is preparation of the eternal—will succumb to the Zionism of the Jewish state, which is a catastrophe. The theocracy has proven to be too weak, and the nation’s priests have not placed themselves in the breach. Now the worldly political Zionism of yesterday (weltlich-vorgestrigge Zionistenstaatlchkeit) seeks to fill the vacuum left by the theocracy, which cannot be established. The vital forces of the nation, whose influence in Palestine is very small, are slowly dying, flowing into the veins of other nations, because we have not remained loyal to our destiny. In the name of God—this was not what we wanted. We believed inwardly in the fullness of the heart, and that thin and cold petit bourgeoisie, which links a pioneer with Klausner—his moral sermons, which I heard in Petach-Tikvah in 1923, when I happened on a lecture by him by chance, are unforgettable for me. And why? Because the desiccation of the language withered our heart, because we were not left with any expression (Ausdruck) that also made an impression (Eindruck)—because what grew here has not yet come to fruition, so long as it remains before its visible manifestation. We came with the intention of plunging into the fullness of the sea, not externally, but with the intensity of life that grows here, but we are based only in the mud of empty talk, which is spoken to us at assemblies full from wall to wall, no different from the pages of Hashiloach. Hence we must proceed toward a crisis with our eyes open and still hope that it will come soon. In metaphysical fashion we
have lost the battle in the Land of Israel, which Zionism has won in the world. Thus it only remains to discuss which front before God will be the true one. We do not know it yet.27

This passage belongs to a collection of Scholem’s writings and diary entries on Zionism that were written in the years after his immigration, most of which were never published.28 Many of these fragments reflect Scholem’s encounter with Zionism and the Zionist idea against the background of the situation in the Land of Israel, which was new to him, as well as the personal and political crises involved in his immigration and his disillusionment with the development of the Zionist movement in his new home. The passage quoted here is Scholem’s first record of his feelings about Zionism after his arrival in Palestine. Hence both in the depth and the extent of the critique are surprising. The points and problems that he raised here were also central to his critique of the Zionist project during the following decade, the years of his involvement with Brit Shalom. During those years his critique would expand and touch on additional points, but its essentials are already to be found here, in the first year after his immigration—and most likely some of them had emerged earlier. One may suppose that Scholem could have anticipated some of his disappointment with the situation in the Land of Israel even before his immigration and could have prepared himself somewhat for the possibility that the situation in Palestine was moving in a direction different from the one he believed in.29 However, as we shall see below, he could not have anticipated the extent of his shock at the direction that the Zionist movement had chosen to take. In any event, this passage is key for understanding Scholem’s attitude toward Zionism in those years and his activity in Brit Shalom because it contains the kernel of his critique of Zionism, which he maintained during the following years.

In fact the opening sentence of the passage is complex: “Zionism will survive its catastrophe.” This sentence assumes that the catastrophe is an integral component of Zionism, which is doomed to struggle with it. At this stage, Scholem believed that Zionism, as he understood it, would survive that struggle, which gives the passage an optimistic tone at the beginning. The essence of that catastrophe becomes clear to the reader immediately, as well as the significance of Zionism for the author. Indeed, Scholem juxtaposes the catastrophe and Zionism. On the one hand was the state of the Jews (the catastrophe), and on the other hand was “preparation of the eternal.” Given the influence of Ahad Haam, for Scholem the “preparation of the eternal” was, clearly the establishment of a spiritual center in the Land of Israel. He calls the Jewish state a “theocracy,” referring to the nationalist tendency in Zionism—which claimed that the Bible
was the source of the Jewish people’s right to the entire Land of Israel and held that this right was to be asserted by force of arms. This desire for territorial control and the view of how to achieve it were based on the messianic-biblical morality of the prophets, combined with contemporary European chauvinistic tendencies.30

Here Scholem was referring to the seeds of what would shortly become the Revisionist movement, established by Zeev Jabotinsky in 1925, almost at the same time as Brit Shalom was founded. Scholem called these tendencies in Zionism “the worldly political Zionism of yesterday,” and he regarded them as a betrayal of the purpose of Zionism and a sign of the destruction of the movement from within. As a symbol of these tendencies Scholem points to Joseph Klausner, a prominent member of the Revisionist camp who was appointed to the Chair for Modern Hebrew Literature at the Hebrew University. As Scholem’s note indicates, his first encounter with Klausner in Petach-Tikvah, during the first days after his immigration, made a negative impression on him.31 Of course, Scholem saw the key to the future of the Jewish people and its eternal existence as the establishment of a spiritual center in the Land of Israel, and thus any expression of what he interpreted as lack of seriousness or charlatanism was a threat. In other words, if Jewish culture was a condition for the realization of Zionism and the revival of Judaism, then Zionism needed to take the form of the research into that culture. For Scholem, Klausner—who belonged to the Revisionist right and consciously linked his scholarship to his Revisionist political ideas—symbolized the danger lurking for Zionism in the Hebrew language and the way it was used: “Because the desiccation of the language withered our heart.” This is the danger against which Scholem warned two years later in his famous letter to Franz Rosenzweig, discussed in the previous chapter. There Scholem stated that the revival of the Hebrew language entailed many more dangers than outside factors in the Land of Israel.32 In the present passage we can discern the political background of the letter to Rosenzweig, implied in Scholem’s pointing out that the danger for Zionism and its fulfillment was an internal Jewish matter and not closely connected to the Arabs of the land—the outer factor that the Revisionists viewed as a threat.33 In the end, Scholem emphasizes the sentence that was to accompany his point of view on the realization of Zionism in the following years: in a metaphysical manner, in the Land of Israel Zionism lost the battle that it had won in the Diaspora. We can learn about the essence of this battle from what Scholem hints afterward: “Thus it only remains to discuss which front before God will be the true one. We do not know it yet.” The metaphysical defeat of Zionism in the Land of Israel left open the question of religious ethics—which is the right moral side, or “front,” in the eyes of God. Scholem’s critique would
grow stronger in the following years and reach its peak in 1930, in response to the Arab riots of 1929. As noted above, the great importance of this document, aside from its containing the essentials of Scholem’s critique of the Zionist project during the following years, is its date. At the end of 1924, a year after his immigration to the Land of Israel and a year before the establishment of Brit Shalom, Scholem was already expressing the critique that would become the basis for that association’s platform.

As mentioned above, Brit Shalom was founded in early 1926, and the first public declaration of its members was in opposition to the establishment of a Jewish armed brigade. The idea of creating a Jewish military force was one of the central guiding principles of Zeev Jabotinsky’s political activities from a very early stage, and he succeeded when a Jewish Legion was established in the British army during World War I. The last of these was disbanded after the riots of 1921. In 1925 Jabotinsky founded a political movement, the Revisionist Zionist Alliance, which was a faction in the World Zionist Organization until it split from the larger group in 1935. Jabotinsky had worked out the principles of the movement before its establishment. He addressed the relations of Zionism to the Palestinian Arabs in an article published in 1923, “On the Iron Wall”—a term adopted by the coming generations: “Our colonization should either stop or continue against the will of the native population. And this is why it may continue and develop only under the protection of a force, independent of the local population—an iron wall, through which the local population cannot break.”

The Zionist realization of the idea of Jewish nationalism was Jabotinsky’s goal, and his approach was realistic both in its recognition of the existence of the Palestinian Arabs as a nation with aspirations for self-determination and in the solution that he proposed for the problem of the existence of two nations on the same land. In principle Jabotinsky had no objection to reaching an agreement with the Palestinian Arabs, but the way to that agreement was “the iron wall,” meaning the unilateral strengthening of Jewish rule over the Land of Israel.

Brit Shalom was established largely as a response to Revisionism, and one may see the association’s ideological position with respect to the attitude of Zionism toward the Palestinian Arabs as a mirror image of the position of the Revisionist movement. Anita Shapira has pointed out that both opposing movements did not avoid the problem of the Palestinian Arabs, and both sought a practical solution, aware of the essential differences between the two nations and of the existence of Arab nationalism. In addition, both movements understood that the solution had to be radical, and that any compromise or evasion, such as the policy of the Zionist establishment of the Yishuv, was inadequate. The great difference between the two movements was that the Revisionists thought the only
way to ensure a Jewish majority in the Land of Israel and fulfill the Zionist project was through territorial nationalism that depended on the force of arms, while the members of Brit Shalom saw that majority itself as a disaster for Zionism and proof of its inner moral failure. To them, the danger for Zionism came from ignoring the needs of the Arab nation and from emphasizing hollow territorial and military nationalism instead of the revival of the spirit, ethics, and culture of the Jewish people. Instead of Revisionist nationalism, the members of Brit Shalom proposed the idea of binationalism, giving both nations equal weight and rights in the political formation of Palestine. Another essential difference between the groups was in their size and in the recognition they received within the Zionist movement over the years. While the members of Brit Shalom and their ideas remained marginal in the Zionist consensus, if not outside of it, the ideas of the Revisionist movement were adopted by the public in the Yishuv and continue to influence the policies of the State of Israel to this day.

In the long passage we have been discussing, Scholem predicted a crisis in Zionism and even hoped that it would come soon, apparently to alter what he regarded as the wrong path that Zionism had taken. In April 1926, the crisis began to take on form and substance in Scholem’s private notes:

Thus our movement will still confront a dreadful crisis, which will continue to live among us for a long time, the era when the Jews in Palestine will have to climb on the iron wall, defenseless, with their inner being undefended, because they fell into the original sin: anticipation of our victory. He who predicts his victory in spirituality will lose the power to gain it in materiality. We not only dreamed our utopia by ourselves, the beautiful hours when we believed we were ascending, but they drained the best of our strength to the marrow: we won too soon, because we are winning in the revealed world of the intelligentsia, before doing so in the invisible world of demons (Dämonen) who threaten the language of our rebirth, which is developing under duress and in assemblies.38

The iron wall—the physical power that, according to Jabotinsky, was a condition for the success of the Zionist project and Jewish existence in the Land of Israel—becomes for Scholem the main obstacle to the fulfillment of Zionism. The source of the future power and defense of the Yishuv was not in the physical exterior, but within it, and in that respect the Yishuv remained exposed and unprotected. Political developments during the first days of the Mandatory government, which showed a clear leaning toward the Jewish side and an understanding of the physical needs of Zionism, created great optimism in the ranks of the Zionist movement. The declarations of encouragement of Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel and the expansion of settlement there to create a
national home for the Jews produced the feeling that an opportunity had been created to realize the dream of the Jewish state. According to Scholem, this was the premature victory of Zionism, which was predicting a successful future for itself on the material and physical plane. As opposed to this exteriority, Scholem speaks of the hidden interior, which he calls demonic, which will defeat the Zionist movement, and which is expressed in the use of the Hebrew language. The demonic inner being is disobedient to the standards of ethics and the spirit that, in Scholem’s opinion, are required from Zionism. The illusion of victory in the revealed world, the world of intelligence, led to neglect of the struggle on the hidden level, that of ethics. Hence it is possible to understand how Scholem saw the establishment of the Revisionist movement, which advocated ideas contrary to his own about the fulfillment of Zionism, as accelerating movement toward the crisis that he both feared and hoped for. Nevertheless, this passage lacks the optimistic tone that characterized the beginning of his comments from 1924, and the feeling of defeat has grown stronger.

The solution that Scholem found for this crisis, and that also characterized the policy of Brit Shalom, was silence and withdrawal from all public discourse. In deciding to adopt this passive path, the members of the association relied on its primary definition as a research group. At that time Scholem made no public declaration of his political positions, and the only evidence of the psychological turmoil aroused in him by the direction that Zionism was taking is in his personal writings. This situation changed in 1928. That was when the members of the radical group of Brit Shalom began to express their political opinion in public and thus to change the association’s policy. Scholem was part of this trend as an editor of the new magazine Shefoteiu, which was the organ of Brit Shalom, and in his publication of political articles taking issue with the path of Revisionism. For example, on November 20, 1928, he wrote in Jüdische Rundschau: “Only this bumpy road is left, to work for rapprochement within our camp and within that of the Arabs. Or else the path of the Revisionists is left, to depend on an imaginary sword and not to be deterred from oppressing the inhabitants of the land, to bring the Jewish state into being. But precisely this will be, if it is possible to implement this, none other than the absolute decline (Untergang) of Zionism.”

In 1928, for the first time Jewish messianism appears in Scholem’s writings in a negative context. His first article about Sabbateanism was published in that year, in the final issue of Der Jude, which was dedicated to Buber’s fiftieth birthday. This article, which deals with the Sabbatean Abraham Cardoso, concludes with the following declaration: “The messianic phraseology of Zionism, especially at important moments, contains no little of the Sabbatean temptation, and it has the capacity to bring about the shattering or renewal of Judaism and the
steadying of its world in the spirit of the unbroken language. While all the theological structures, including those of Cardoso and Jakob Frank, faded away with time, the deepest and most destructive motivation of Sabbateanism—the hubris of the Jews—remains in place.”

According to his diary and personal notes before his immigration, messianism occupied a solid place in Scholem’s inner world. The image and character of the messiah frequently preoccupied him, and he usually attributed a positive place and goal to Jewish messianism. Throughout his life Jewish messianism interested him, and he devoted a good part of his intellectual energy to it as a historical phenomenon. But the positive and sympathetic tone that he used in writing about it as a young man faded in his later scholarship. Scholem presented the powers of renewal of the Sabbatean movement as breaking the traditional framework of Jewish society and heralding new forms of Jewish life such as Hasidism, the Haskala (Jewish Enlightenment), and secularization. Usually he accompanied this narrative with a warning about the price that Jewish messianism exacted and continues to exact from the Jewish people and the threat to the existence of a healthy and independent Jewish society in Israel. Scholem saw this threat in every identification of Zionism with messianism, and not only in the Revisionist movement but in political Zionism in general. In any event, 1928 marked the beginning of the change in Scholem’s attitude toward messianism as he emphasized its dangers. As noted above, this change happened when he began his research into Sabbateanism, but his personal crisis with Zionism, which was also partly responsible for the change in his understanding of Jewish messianism, was the outcome of a long crisis that reached a climax at the end of the decade—after the events at the Western Wall.

The Events of 1929 and Their Aftermath

The decision of the members of Brit Shalom to break their public silence was connected to the increasing tension, starting in the autumn of 1928, about the question of control of the places in Jerusalem that were holy to Judaism and Islam. On the eve of Yom Kippur, the Jews erected a partition at the foot of the Western Wall to separate men from women. This action provoked a protest from the Supreme Muslim Council because the Jews had violated the status quo that had prevailed there. This event signaled the exacerbation of tension between the populations, as the Western Wall became, to a large degree, a symbol of the struggle between the two nations. In fact, the context of the friction was the Arabs’ fear of the threat inherent in the rapid growth of the Yishuv and the declared support of the Mandatory government for Zionist policies. The tension
between the two sides reached a peak on August 14, 1929, following a demonstration held in Tel Aviv and mass prayers at the Western Wall in which about 3,000 Jews took part. The next day a demonstration was held at the Western Wall involving hundreds of Jews, some of whom—members of Beitar, the Revisionist youth movement—bore clubs. After Friday prayers on August 16 and during the following days, until August 24, masses of Arabs rioted in Jerusalem, and Arabs attacked Jews throughout the country. In these riots 133 Jews were killed and 339 were wounded, and in efforts to protect the Jewish population and in acts of revenge, 116 Arabs were killed and 232 were wounded.45

The Yishuv was shocked by the extent and results of the riots. “For the first time,” Anita Shapira writes, “the Jewish community in Palestine found itself caught up in a wave of violent disturbances that swept with a fury through Jewish settlements and neighborhoods throughout the length and breadth of the country. The danger now appeared to threaten the very survival of the entire Jewish community.”46 The feeling of danger brought about a change in Zionist policy in the Yishuv and its relations with the Arab population. The process of separation of the two nations was accelerated, and as the gap between them widened, their mutual hostility increased.47 On the Jewish side a process began in which, “almost imperceptibly, a powerful identity was generated between self-defence, demonstration of force, and national revival.”48 This glorification of the use of force cast a negative light on refraining from physical defense and counterattacks. The new reality left the members of Brit Shalom outside the consensus. After the riots, there were harsh polemics in the Jewish press in the Land of Israel and Germany against the path of the members of the association, and Scholem and others defended their worldview against the criticism aimed at them. In responses that Scholem wrote in the association’s magazine, Sheifoteinu and in Davar, the Histadrut daily newspaper, he reprimanded the Yishuv for what he saw as the great error it had committed and advocated what he regarded as the correct path for the Zionist movement.49 In these publications Scholem sharpened his positions regarding Zionism and its development and clarified his opinions, which he had expressed until then only in his diaries and personal notes.

A central polemical article by Scholem appeared in Sheifoteinu under the title, “Bemai ka Miflegei?”—an Aramaic phrase found in the Talmud meaning, “What do we disagree about?” The main burden of this article was an effort to clarify the differences of opinion between the members of Brit Shalom and the Zionist majority, and what the relation of the former was to the latter. This article became, in a way, a reflection of Scholem’s understanding of the development and failures of Zionism, which he believed had led to the crisis of 1929.50 According to Scholem, the controversy about the Arab question was related to an
internal Jewish question about the path of Zionism in general, and the debate was actually a struggle over what the essence of Zionism was and how Zionism should be fulfilled.\(^5\)

According to Scholem, the effort to create a center in the Land of Israel, in the spirit of Ahad Haam—which was, as noted above, intended to guarantee the eternal existence of Judaism and to be a source of spiritual inspiration for Jews in the Diaspora—had failed.\(^5\) Zionism had been active in the Diaspora before the spiritual center was established in the Land of Israel, and therefore Zionism used its best energies, especially in the light of its great success in the Diaspora, for the wrong purpose: to ensure the renewal and continued existence of Jewish life in the periphery—the Diaspora—rather than investing in an effort to establish a national home at the center. The Land of Israel and the Diaspora were separated from each other, and the proper order of things had been overturned. The place that was supposed to be the center of Zionism had become its periphery, and the Yishuv could hardly continue to exist without Zionism in the Diaspora.

In Scholem’s opinion, Zionism should be exclusive and particularistic to the extent of becoming sectarian, and this was the true way to achieve its goals.\(^5\) The sect represents the esoteric, hidden, and invisible side of Jewish spiritual renewal, one of whose characteristics—as noted above—was the revival of the Hebrew language, and only after this process of renewal can the exoteric and universal stage come. The early success of the Zionist movement had brought it to a crisis, for it no longer had anywhere to advance: its political goals had been achieved before everyone’s eyes, before its esoteric task was accomplished. Here is how Scholem expressed this in a letter to Walter Benjamin on August 1, 1931:

In the empty passion of a vocation become public we ourselves have invoked the forces of destruction. Our catastrophe started where the vocation did not maintain itself in its profanation, where community was not developed in its legitimate concealment, but where instead the betrayal of the secret values that lure us here became transformed into a positive side of the demonic propaganda. By becoming visible our cause was destroyed. The encounter with Sleeping Beauty took place in the presence of too many paying spectators for it to have ended with an embrace. Zionism disregarded the night and shifted the procreation that ought to have meant everything to it to a world market where there was too much sunlight and the covetousness of the living degenerated into a prostitution of the last remnants of our youth. That was not the place we had come to find nor the light that could enflame us.\(^5\)

In “Bemai ka Mifragei?” Scholem saw the “original sin” of Zionism as depending on the great powers and joining the side of the victors after World War I. In Zionism’s choice of the winning side as a partner in the Zionist project, as
expressed in the Balfour Declaration, it betrayed one of what Scholem considered its most important principles, being a revolutionary movement. The revolution must come from below, from the weak, and therefore the correct allies from the ethical and historical point of view, those with whom the Jewish people shared a common fate, were not the British but the Arabs. By choosing British imperialism as its partner—a choice that Scholem calls “a counterfeit victory”—Zionism was destined to lose: “either it will be washed away along with the waters of imperialism, or it will be burned in the fire of the revolution of the awakening Orient.”

In this article Scholem espoused a practical political line that rejected the Revisionist territorial approach but also opposed the approach of the young MAPAI (the Hebrew acronym of the Worker’s Party of the Land of Israel), which had been established in 1930 and was on the fence with regard to the relationship of Zionism to the Palestinian Arabs. The criticism of MAPAI, which represented the central stream of Zionism and was closer in its socialist principles to the views of the members of Brit Shalom than to those of the Revisionists, was a response to the Seventeenth Zionist Congress, which took place in Basel in 1931. At this congress Jabotinsky initiated a debate on the matter of the final goal of Zionism, in the wake of the controversy with Brit Shalom. And during the congress Chaim Weizmann, who later became the first president of the State of Israel, gave an interview in which he said that he did not support the existence of a Jewish majority in the Land of Israel. The content of this interview aroused a great turmoil among the delegates, in which Jabotinsky publicly tore up his entry card to the congress. This episode marked the beginning of the separation of the Revisionist Zionist Alliance from the World Zionist Organization, from which it was completely severed in 1935. After these events MAPAI was called on to abandon its vague approach to the matter, provide a clear definition of the goal of Zionism, and decide whether or not it supported the establishment of a Jewish state. The party’s great fear was that any proclamation that the goal of Zionism was a Jewish state, which meant a Jewish majority in the Land of Israel, might cause a conflagration in the region. Therefore delegates to the Congress decided to issue a milder and more general statement, according to which the goal of Zionism was “continuous immigration and settlement and renewal of full national existence in Palestine with all features of normal Jewish life.” This declaration, along with David Ben-Gurion’s accusation that the members of Brit Shalom were responsible for the flaring up of the controversy that the Revisionists had aroused and for pushing MAPAI into a corner with their demand for clarity, provoked a vehement response from Scholem. In an editorial in Sheifo-teinu he accused MAPAI of advocating a hawkish ideology, which was disguised
for strategic reasons with ostensibly dovish declarations: “Here is revealed the dreadful psychological reality which must bring destruction and disintegration to the [Zionist] movement: the great majority of the Zionist Congress wants a Jewish state, but it does not want to admit it openly.” Scholem’s fear was that this strategic declaration would in time become the MAPAI creed, a creed to which Brit Shalom objected strenuously. Scholem protested strongly against the accusation that Brit Shalom intended to diminish Zionism: “Our wish is not to diminish the image of Zionism, but to rouse Zionism from the superfluous and dangerous nightmare, a dream that does not belong in any way to the essence of Zionism as the movement of renewal of the Jewish people, and we must continue this battle with greater intensity and strength. If this is the dream of Zionism: numbers and ‘borders,’ if it cannot subsist without it, then it will fail in the end, or, rather, it has already failed.”

Scholem’s battle against the calls for a Jewish majority in the Land of Israel was not limited to his public activity in Brit Shalom or to publishing articles in Palestine and Germany. His position and opinions after the 1929 riots were expressed in a practical way in his unwillingness to participate in the propaganda efforts of the Yishuv following the violent events or the struggle to gain the sympathy of the British. In the wake of the 1929 riots, the Zionist movement established a committee whose purpose was to examine material about the Western Wall and the question of Jewish rights to it, and to present that material to the international commission whose members were going to come to the Land of Israel to investigate the subject. As part of its activities, the committee asked Scholem “please to help it with its work by examining all the material that exists in Kabbalah literature regarding the Western Wall and on a Jewish synagogue on the Temple Mount.” Scholem did not answer this letter and refused to cooperate with the committee. A year afterward a letter to the editor was published in Doar Hayom, which was identified with Revisionist views at that time. The author of the letter, A. Babakov, presented a highly inaccurate account of what had happened and expressed his disapproval of Scholem’s actions and asked that steps be taken to prevent him from “continuing ‘to preach Torah’ in Israel.”

Three days later, the newspaper published Scholem’s reply. He stated that his refusal to help the committee was a refusal to take part as a private individual “in scientific work for juridical and political purposes.” His reason for refusing to cooperate was still valid: “Since I thought and still think that the entry of Jews in a judicial trial regarding the Western Wall is a great disaster for the Jewish people, I demand for myself, as for any private individual with a conscience, the elementary right to refrain from active participation (as was asked of me) in preparing steps that I regard as damaging and destructive. In my humble opinion,
the question of the Western Wall cannot be resolved by legal deliberations before a third party.”

This episode demonstrates how Scholem applied his political opinions on the practical level. In his criticism of one of the main political principles shared by Mapai and Jabotinsky, Scholem expressed his opposition to the view that depending on the British and cooperating with the Mandatory regime was the key to achieving the political goals of Zionism, whatever they might be. Not only did Scholem oppose the political aspect of Zionism, but he also felt that the way to achieve the Zionist dream was to come to an understanding with the Arabs of the land—who, in his view, were the main ally instead of the British. He saw the importance of dialogue with the Arabs and did not recognize the authority of the British as mediators in any controversy in Palestine.

Testimony to the great break with Zionism that took place within Scholem after the events at the Western Wall can also be found in his more personal writing, which became increasingly gloomy as time passed. At the end of June 1930 he wrote a poem in German titled “Begegnung mit Zion und der Welt (Der Untergang)” (Encounter with Zion and the world [the decline]), in which one senses bitter disappointment and disillusionment. The poem ends with the following two stanzas:

This was the darkest hour:
 waking from the dream.
 And though the wounds were mortal,
 they were never what they seemed.

What was within is now without,
 the dream twists into violence,
 and once again we stand outside
 and Zion is without form or sense.64

Scholem also expressed the crisis that was brewing within him in correspondence with friends and colleagues who were in Europe at the time. Along with the letter to Benjamin, mentioned above, Scholem wrote about his feelings to Martin Buber, a man who was close to the members of Brit Shalom and an authority figure for them. The sharp change in Scholem’s outlook is evident in that letter:

We must say to ourselves that there is no longer any importance to the way we interpret Zionism, now that its face has been revealed (and now the hour is decisive, no one can deceive himself anymore), even when it is turned toward itself, like the face of the Medusa. Of course: this is the moment because of which many of us, and I in any event, are found here: we believe that this is unbearable, if we are forced to say to
ourselves that our cause has failed without our being actual partners in it. The inner situation is horrible, the demoralization is complete. This is evident to everyone here, leaving almost no hope that it is still possible to do anything, because it is not the way of historical moments to turn back, and nothing can be saved of what was lost during the past half year for the sake of the renewal of Judaism.65

These were not just words written in the heat of the events. Instead, they signaled a turning point in Scholem’s attitude toward Zionism and Zionist activity in the Land of Israel, or—to be precise—his acute realization that the Zionist movement had undergone a change that distanced the manner of its implementation from the utopia that had been its heritage. In the decades following the disbanding of Brit Shalom, and indeed for the rest of his life, Scholem refrained from all political activity. For example, he did not take part in the pacifist Ihud (Unity) Association established by Judah Leib Magnes in 1942, though some of the members of Brit Shalom did.66 The years of his membership in Brit Shalom were the only time in his life when he belonged to an organization with a clear political direction and was active in it. Afterward, Scholem shut himself off in his academic research and lived his life, as Joseph Dan states, “according to the conventions typical of a professor at a German university, distant and shut off from current events and from the community around him.”67 After this, Scholem took a practical approach toward Zionism, at first to defend and represent the positions of Brit Shalom, and then to explain his Zionist motivations in the State of Israel. For example, in an interview many years later about a lecture he gave in Germany on behalf of Brit Shalom, he said:

I was once asked, when I was abroad, I was asked to speak about Brit Shalom, they asked me in a very stormy dispute, in Frankfurt am Main in 1932, “What do you actually want?” I told them, and I was known as supposedly one of the radicals of Brit Shalom, “What I want is very simple, I want the Jewish state on both banks of the Jordan.” You know that was the Revisionist slogan. If you ask me what I want—I want a Hebrew state on both banks of the Jordan. But the question isn’t what I want. The question is what in effect, in the reality that exists in the country, it is possible to want. And not just what you want in a dream. In a dream I want a Jewish state. In reality, I don’t believe that a Jewish state in that form is possible. So I take the line of Brit Shalom.68

Scholem’s realistic and practical approach was anchored in the fact that the question of a Jewish state in the political situation of that time “was an unrealistic question. No one in the camp we were arguing with, the members of the governing body of the Histadrut, thought that the question of the Jewish state in 1929 was a question of our generation.”69 In the political situation in the Land of Israel during the 1930s the realistic possibility, in Scholem’s opinion, was
the establishment of a small spiritual center that would act in cooperation with the Arabs and that eventually might become a binational state. Hence, as noted above, came Scholem’s conception of Zionism as a nonmessianic movement, and his understanding of the hope for the political realization of Zionism as dangerous messianism. As early as 1929 he regarded the idea of political redemption in the Land of Israel as a threatening mixture of religion and politics: “I absolutely deny that Zionism is a messianic movement, and that it has the right . . . to use religious language for political purposes. The redemption of the Jewish people for which I strive as a Zionist is not at all identical to the future religious redemption for which I hope.”70 He supported the principle of separation of religion and state all his life, and as a corollary to that he believed that Zionism was not messianic, even after the establishment of the State of Israel. In later years Scholem saw Zionism as the entry of the Jewish people into history and the Jews’ assumption of responsibility for their fate—a responsibility that included accountability for their actions. He regarded the realization of Zionism as an event taking place in history and not—like the redemption—at its end.71

Regarding his personal relationship to Zionism and the reason for which he chose to move to Palestine, in later years Scholem developed that could be called a “no-alternative Zionism,” meaning that he understood his immigration and his action for the realization of the Zionist utopia solely as attempts for which there was never any guarantee of success. However, his motivation was the recognition that there was no option except to try. The first signs of this approach appear in his early notes, some of which are discussed in this chapter. Scholem repeated his position clearly in interviews years after the establishment of the State of Israel. For example, in late 1964 he said:

If you asked me, when I immigrated to the country, whether I had a political interest in Zionism, I would doubtless have answered: No. If you asked me: Why did you immigrate? My answer would doubtless have been: . . . I immigrated because I thought there was no hope except here. I didn’t think we had assurance that this project would succeed here. . . . I was pessimistic with regard to the Jewish cause, but I wanted it to succeed, that is, I wanted and I thought that I had to live in the Land of Israel, in any event, that I had to try. There is no other way. If you asked me: Are you interested in building a new society and expecting it? What is more important to you, the building of a living social organism, or a political framework? Without doubt I would have answered you in the years of my youth, and I would answer today, that the first matter is the more important.72

Scholem’s deterministic attitude, signs of which already appeared in his early writings, was clearly expressed only after the establishment of the state. The pur-
pose of this conception was to resolve the conflict that arose within him in the light of the way that the Zionist idea had developed and was implemented in the following decades—as will be discussed in the following chapters—and in view of the Holocaust and its meanings for the Zionist project. “No-alternative Zionism” enabled Scholem to live in the country in spite of the disappointment he felt because of the direction of the historical development of the Zionist movement, which leaned toward nationalistic Revisionist ideas and turned away from the path of Ahad Haam. This disappointment or disillusionment was certainly a natural phenomenon in the process of immigration and adaption to a new life in the Land of Israel, and not something that differentiated Scholem from other members of his generation.

Perhaps to be able to continue calling himself a Zionist and to reconcile himself to the political reality in his home in the Land of Israel and the State of Israel, Scholem needed to bring out the deterministic side of his understanding of Zionist and develop a “no-alternative” position. Similarly, in later years he refrained from passing judgment (either favorable or unfavorable) on Brit Shalom and from commenting on its historical contribution or the correctness of its path in his view, and this is consistent with his withdrawal from political involvement. For example, looking back on the historical role of Brit Shalom in an interview in 1972, he said, “I am not prepared to say today, ‘we sinned,’ or ‘I sinned,’ and I am not prepared to say that we were righteous or that we say that this was precisely the path.”

In fact, the ideas that were the basis of Brit Shalom’s platform appear in Scholem’s diaries and notes even before his immigration to the Land of Israel, as well as immediately afterward. The fact that in 1924 he had already noticed the political trends that were relevant for him after 1929 also points to his great political sensitivity, the way the Yishuv was developing, and his involvement in that development. The events of 1929 were a turning point in Scholem’s relationship to the Zionist project, but the crisis had arisen before then. Many years later, in another interview, Scholem described the 1920s as “a plastic hour” in the history of the Yishuv and of Zionism, when “perhaps we could have made certain decisions which would have affected our relations with the Arabs.” But in accordance with what he hinted at in the passage above, the rise of the Nazis in 1933 and the influence of that on Zionism put an end to the sense of miscarriage: “But after Hitler, there was nothing to be done but to save as many Jews as possible.” Brit Shalom ceased to exist in 1933. From then on Scholem withdrew from the political field into the academic world and the private realm—taking part only in more intimate social circles or circles based on academic inquiry.