Next Year in Jerusalem

Greenspoon, Leonard

Published by Purdue University Press

Greenspoon, Leonard.  
Next Year in Jerusalem: Exile and Return in Jewish History.  
Purdue University Press, 2019.  
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Is Zionism a Movement of Return?

Haim Sperber

Mainstream Zionist historiography tends to describe Zionism as a movement of return. Early Zionism (1881–1917) is portrayed as a political movement composed of two distinct subgroups: religious Zionism and secular Zionism. Both groups are described as having the same objective: creating a Jewish state in the Land of Israel.¹ This essay offers another perspective regarding Zionism. I shall focus our attention here on one question: was Zionism a movement of return from its outset, or did it become one in a later stage?

Conventional historiography offers the following periodization of early Zionism (before 1914):

- The Lovers of Zion [Hovevei Zion] phase (1881–1896), focusing on immigration to Zion. This constitutes the First Aliyah period.² The movement operated mainly in Eastern Europe.³
- The Zionist Organization movement, which was the Herzlian phase (1897–1904). In this period the focus was on international politics. It was Theodor Herzl who made Zionism an international Jewish movement, not just an East European one.
- Post–Herzlian Zionist organization (1904–1914), which focused on immigration to Zion. This was the period of the Second Aliyah.

In this essay I claim that early Zionism (1881–1914) was not aiming at returning⁴ to Eretz-Israel and reestablishing the Third Temple [Beit Ha-Miqdash Ha-shlishi], a popular term for Zionists after 1967. Why did this change? I offer here an alternative interpretation of the development of Zionism: only in 1967 did Zionism become a movement of return. I also claim that the roots of the post-1967 division in Israeli society respecting the rule of the whole Land of Israel [Eretz Israel Ha-Shlema] derive from a change in the ways the Zionist objectives were set.

My main claim is that the Zionist movement was in fact a political union of two different movements aiming at two different objects: (1) re-creating the old kingdom of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel or in other places (cultural-ethnic nationalism) and (2) creating a new political Jewish nation (political nationalism).

Asher Ginsberg [Ahad Ha’am]⁵ offered a similar claim by distinguishing between those aiming at solving the Jewish question and those concerned
with the Jews question. In my view, these two movements reflect two different kinds of nationalism—the Jewish question: cultural-ethnic, and the Jews question: political. Ahad Ha'am and his bitter rivals, the religious Zionists, reflected the first; Herzl reflected the second.

In this essay I investigate the difference between the various attitudes and claim that at the end of the nineteenth century, both movements came to the conclusion that establishing a united political organization was a must but did so for different reasons. The decision to form a united political organization blurred the difference between the two. Only after the Six-Day War in 1967 did the issue emerge again; it continues to influence Israel until now.

In my view, there are three periods during which the idea of return changed: 1897–1917, 1917–1967, and 1967 onward. Only since 1967 has the idea of return become important.

1897–1917

Dichotomy was part of Zionism, as it is part of any other political movement. Nationalism covers but a part of the whole range of political activities. People were religious, socialist, etc. and at the same time were Zionists.

My suggestion here is that in addition to those differences, there was a basic dichotomy in the Zionist organization between cultural-ethnic nationalism and political nationalism. The first emphasized the cultural aspects of nationalism; the second emphasized the territorial aspects. These variations in nationalism were not confined to Zionism.

For Ahad Ha'am, cultural Zionism was part of a trend emphasizing cultural autonomies. This trend was created by Ahad Ha'am's close friend, the historian Simon Dubnov. Jewish territorial nationalism had other variations as well. Late nineteenth-century Zionism was composed of two different variations of nationalism. Herzl represented one point of view; Ahad Ha'am presented the other.

It was Herzl who understood the importance of political unity within Jewish nationalist movements and created the Zionist movement in Basel in 1897. The difference between the two versions of nationalism brought Ahad Ha'am to publish, a few months after the first Zionist Congress (in October 1897), what I believe was his most important piece, Medinat Ha-Yehudim Ve-Tzurat Ha-Yehudim [The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem]. (Jewish State was also the title of Herzl's famous book.)

Here Ahad Ha'am claimed that the East European Lovers of Zion movement represented a totally different version of Zionism, a movement dealing
with the daily problems of Jewish Life, “the real Jewish Problem.” Herzlian Zionism was, according to Ahad Ha’am, a political movement. It believed that creating a Jewish state would solve the Jewish problem, which, according to Herzl, was antisemitism.

Ahad Ha’am was a great rival of the religious groups in Lovers of Zion [Hovevei Zion or Hibat Zion], the forerunner of the Zionist movement in Eastern Europe. However, I claim that he had much more in common with them than with Theodor Herzl.

Herzl’s perspective was very different. He disregarded the cultural identity issue and was concerned only with the political one. His point of view was based on two assumptions: (1) the need to combat antisemitism and (2) assisting European powers in the colonialist project. Herzl did not convince Ahad Ha’am to join his organization but did persuade East European members of the earlier Lovers of Zion movement to join him.

Yossi Goldstein rightly claimed that the conflict between Herzl and Ahad Ha’am encapsulated the cultural divide that separated the two, as well as it reflected the political and ideological rift separating East from West. The Eastern bloc wished Zionism to maintain strong ties to a sense of Jewish continuity (if not necessarily to traditional Jewish practice). The Western one was more cosmopolitan and assimilationist in its bent. From the first Zionist Congress onward, Ahad Ha’am assumed the role of Herzl’s chief opponent. At first, he was a voice crying in the wilderness, but within seven years, he headed a united front whose members sought to remove Herzl or at least force him into a minority. The point of no return was reached in a clash known as the “Alteneuland Affair,” whose personal side was as strong as its other aspects, if not more so. For after this episode concluded with his defeat and Herzl’s victory, Ahad Ha’am bowed out of all active Zionist political life.

I claim that the Ahad Ha’am–Herzl conflict was much deeper than Goldstein portrays it. It reflected the gap between the two brands of nationalism described above.

1917–1967

In 1904 Herzl died, and Zionist leaders decided to concentrate on working within Jewish communities, especially in Eastern Europe, and creating more settlements in Palestine. There was no chance to create a Jewish state
soon, they believed. However, until 1917 Zionism was a very small and unsuccessful political movement. We must remember that until 1917 almost nobody could have known that Zionism would emerge as the leading and most successful Jewish nationalist movement. Before 1917 the socialist Bund, established the same year as the Zionist organization, was the most powerful nationalist organization among Jewish youths in Eastern Europe.

The publication of the Balfour Declaration in 1917 (by the way, it was Ahad Ha’am, living at that time in London, who translated the Balfour Declaration into Hebrew) and the emerging possibility of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine further blurred the differences of ideology. The success of Zionism and the establishment of a Jewish state empowered political Zionism and blurred even more these differences. Novelty rather than nostalgia was the main issue.

The new state symbolized the Jewish future (not the Jewish past). Greatness was now, not in antiquity. The Jewishness of Israel had to do with its ability to be a safe haven for Jews and become a focal point for the Jews of the world. Return to the holy places was a very neglected issue in the prestate and early state history of Israel. The question “who is a Jew?” was much more important than reoccupying the whole Land of Israel, as was the theme of conquering the desert. The Six-Day War in 1967 changed that.

1967 ONWARD

It is commonly accepted that the idea of returning to the land of the fathers was mainly conceived by the more religious groups within Zionism. Those groups stated that Eretz Israel [the Land of Israel] was much more important than Medinat Israel [the State of Israel]. But we tend to forget that the founders of the movement called the Whole Land of Israel [Eretz Israel Ha-Shlema] included secular socialists such as Haim Guri and Nathan Alterman. Since 1967, the differences between the two perceptions of Zionism have become obvious and are getting clearer and clearer.

Thus, only in 1967 did the topic of Zionism as a movement of return became common in Israel. Until 1967, there were ways in which the collective memory of Israeli relied on the past. The Bible played an important role in this. Israeli and international competitions on knowledge of the Bible are good examples. However, in 1967 many “holy sites” related to the Bible were occupied by Israel. This was a turning point in making Zionism, for many in Israeli society, a movement of return instead of a movement of creation.
NOTES

1. Dimitry Shumsky recently analyzed the Zionist thought of Leon Pinsker, Theodor Herzl, Ahad Ha’am, Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky, and David Ben-Gurion and suggested that not all Zionist thinkers had a common goal: establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. Dimitry Shumsky, Beyond the Nation-State: The Zionist Political Imagination from Pinsker to Ben-Gurion (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).


10. The most famous was the Jewish Territorial Organization. See Gur Alroey, Zionism without Zion: The Jewish Territorial Organization and Its Conflict with the Zionist Organization. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2016).


