

Gil Troy, Why I am a Zionist (2002)

CHAPTER 7

AWAKENING:

MUGGED BY MODERNITY— THE CRISIS OF EMANCIPATION AND THE RISE OF ZIONISM

For centuries the Jews of Europe were locked in their ghettos and shtetls, largely frozen in time. Insulated from outside influences by rampant anti-Semitism, Jews enjoyed a great deal of autonomy. As long as the community paid taxes and followed the laws, Jews could establish their own rabbinical hierarchy, schools, social services, and community funds. They could be ethnically, nationally, ethically, and religiously Jewish. In fact, their Judaism was so coherent, so integrated, that they did not even have a word for “religion” – the modern Hebrew word for religion, *dat*, is of Persian origin.

The Enlightenment, a Western movement celebrating man’s rationality, centrality, and equality, helped melt some of the ice encasing – both imprisoning and protecting – the Jews. The resulting Emancipation offered Jews freedom and equality as citizens, usually on one condition: that they free themselves from their ancient heritage.

NAPOLEON’S SANHEDRIN AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF JEWISH IDENTITY

One moment dramatizes this complicated and traumatic clash between traditional Judaism and the forces of Enlightenment and Emancipation. In 1806 Napoleon convened an Assembly of Jewish Notables throughout his Empire. Christening them with the name of the venerable Jewish tribunal, the Sanhedrin, Napoleon asked his ad hoc council twelve questions. The questions seemed innocuous. They asked where Jews stood on intermarriage, polygamy, divorce, usury. But underlying them was a challenge: were they Jews first or Frenchmen first? How could they reconcile their loyalty to an ancient set of laws uniting a people scattered around the world and their loyalty to a nation offering its citizens liberty, equality and fraternity?

Naturally, the French Jews told the great emperor just what he wanted to hear. All the Jews were cowed, although many of the notables were quite anxious to embrace their emperor and their country. Defining themselves as "Frenchmen of the Mosaic persuasion," hair-splitting and somersaulting their way out of the situations in which Jewish custom or law contradicted French law, these Jews ripped Judaism from its moorings. Rather than a complicated creed and a people's way of life, Judaism became just another religion. It was still true, as the German Jewish convert and poet, Heinrich Heine, wrote, that "Baptism" remained the "ticket of admission" into European civilization. But in taking the Jewish nationalism out of Judaism, Napoleon's Sanhedrin began preparing Judaism for its respectable entry into the West, especially in America.

"BE A MAN ON THE STREET AND A JEW IN YOUR TENT"

Six decades later, when Enlightenment and Emancipation began to transform the Eastern European Jewish masses as well as the French and German Jewish elites, a Russian Jewish poet articulated the great enlightened dream. "Awake my people! How long will you slumber?" Y.L. Gordon asked in 1863. "The night has passed, the sun shines bright," he insisted, thanks to the Enlightenment. "This land of Eden [newly emancipated Russia] now opens its gates to you... [so] Raise your head high, straighten your back, And gaze with loving eyes open" at your new "brothers." To achieve this equality, Gordon offered an essential formula: "Be a man on the street and a Jew in your tent." This then, became what millions of Jews in the first phase of Enlightenment yearned for: a vital, updated yet traditional Judaism at home, but complete acceptance, even anonymity, on the streets of Europe, be it Napoleonic France or Czarist Russia.

THE RISE OF ANTI-SEMITISM AND THE DEATH OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Look at the modern Jewish world. Almost all the major movements, institutions, and dilemmas that define Jewish life today are rooted in the nineteenth century. The three major branches of contemporary Judaism, Reform, Conservative and Orthodox, emerged in the first few decades of the century. The Reformers tried to revolutionize Judaism; the Conservatives took a step back from the Reform efforts and tried to help

Judaism evolve within the boundaries of the *Halachah*, Jewish law; and the Orthodox rejected these radical changes. In the 1700s no one spoke about being "Orthodox" – although we would define most of the Jews at the time as such.

Similarly, Zionism and Bundism – a harbinger of today's proud, liberal, non-religious ethnicity – emerged in the last few decades of the 1800s. The nineteenth-century clash between Judaism and Enlightenment forged most of the tools we use to balance our Jewish lives and our secular lives, our synagogues, schools, camps, and organizations. And only in the nineteenth century did the two biggest centers of contemporary Jewry, Israel and the United States, begin to attract Jews en masse.

More than transforming the Jewish world, the nineteenth century largely invented our modern world as we know it. It was an age of isms – rationalism, secularism, liberalism, Socialism, Communism. It was also an age of great optimism that inspired many talented European Jews. Only by understanding these hopes can we fathom just how devastating it was to see the Enlightenment, their very source of salvation, also breed a new, virulent, and racial form of the age-old Jew hatred, anti-Semitism.

Anti-Semitism, alas, had roots in the ideological ferment and in the social change among the most forward-looking thinkers and among the most backward-looking bigots. Sadly, both a dedication to Enlightenment and an aversion to it spawned anti-Semitism. As a result, Jews were caricatured as both modernizers and traditionalists, as conspirators trying to sneak through Christian defenses by hiding in the Trojan horse of Enlightenment, as well as conspirators seeking to keep society in the dark ages.

KISHINEV, 1903 – CITY OF SLAUGHTER

Anti-Semitism was particularly embittering to Enlightened Jews because it left them doubly deprived. Losing faith in their new secular god did not restore faith in the ancestral God – or in those folkways and rituals they repudiated. Nowhere was this sense of loss captured more powerfully than in the great Russian Jewish poet Chaim Nahman Bialik's heartbreaking "*Ir HaHareigah*," City of Slaughter. Appointed to a commission to investigate the bloody Kishinev pogroms in Russia, in 1903, an embittered Bialik wrote an epic poem describing what he had seen.

"City of Slaughter" vividly recreates the terror and brutality of the Cossacks who wantonly raped mothers and daughters, dead or alive. But Bialik also turns his attention to the victims' cowardly menfolk. Not only did they cower in the corners, praying for their own salvation while

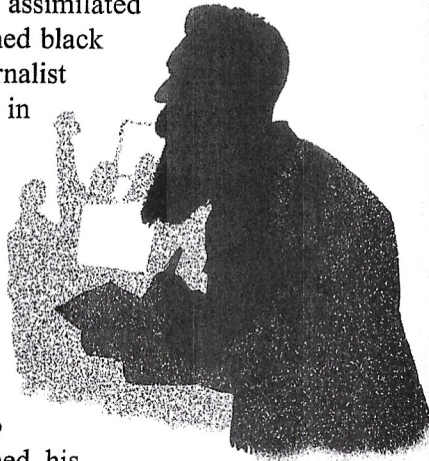
watching the unwatchable, but those who were *Cohanim*, descendants of the high priests, ran out of the house when the pillaging was finished, burst into the Rabbi's study and asked: Is my wife now permissible to be touched or unclean? In attacking their timidity, in attacking their pedantic, soulless legalism, Bialik speaks for a whole generation that repudiated the desiccated ways of the rabbis.

But where could someone like Bialik turn? The harsh anti-Semitism of the nineteenth century made manifest the Jewish problem that was latent throughout the century. Even if a young Viennese journalist Theodor Herzl had not stumbled onto an anti-Dreyfus rally in France that turned anti-Semitic, there were many people at the turn of the century who understood that the Jewish problem required creative solutions.

THE ZIONIST SOLUTIONS

Many movements have founding moments, dramatic epiphanies supposedly launching the great initiative. Modern feminists often point to the publication in 1963 of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* as the start of their movement. Similarly, Zionists point to Theodor Herzl's epiphany. Herzl, a cultivated and assimilated Middle European with a distinguished black beard, was a playwright and journalist covering the divisive treason trial in 1894 of a French Captain, Alfred Dreyfus. Herzl's Jewish identity awakened – and Zionist vision emerged – when the crowds shouted “Death to the Jew” rather than “Death to the Traitor,” a descent into Jew-hatred exacerbated by the fact that Dreyfus was not even guilty. He had been framed. Two years later, in 1896, Herzl published his manifesto, *Der Judenstaat, The Jewish State*.

Of course, Herzl's epiphany, like Friedan's, was only the tip of the iceberg – both movements had been building for decades. The nineteenth century spawned the Zionist revolution, and Herzl's metamorphosis. It was a century of intellectual chaos, of fragmenting identity, of great hope and deep despair. Zionism, at its most sweeping, wanted to fix both of Bialik's problems – protect Bialik and his co-religionists from anti-Semitism by



making them “normal,” giving them a state, and in so doing revitalize Judaism, sweep away the legalistic commitment to mental gymnastics rather than real life. The founders of the Kibbutz movement, among others, also saw the new Jewish state as a vanguard for worldwide change. Many thinkers believed that the chaos of the Jewish world mirrored the bedlam of the outside world. At their most grandiose, they hoped to save the world as well as save the Jews. Theodor Herzl, whose political Zionism is now remembered as pragmatic and unromantic, did promise that with a Jewish state: “We shall live at last as free men on our own soil, and in our own homes peacefully die.” But his imagination also soared when he beheld the Switzerland in the sand he hoped to build. “The world will be liberated by our freedom, enriched by our wealth, magnified by our greatness,” he gushed. “And whatever we attempt there for our own benefit will redound mightily and beneficially to the good of all mankind.”

While rooting itself in God's covenant with Abraham, while inhaling Herzl's utopian yet conventionally European spirit, Zionism was also radical. Zionists demanded what Nietzsche called a “transvaluation of values,” an ideological overhaul. In the early 1900s, Micah Joseph Berdichevski reflected Zionism's rootedness in tradition and its radicalism when he recalled the Rabbinic teaching: “Whoever walks by the way and interrupts his study to remark, How fine is that tree, how fine is that field – forfeits his life!” Berdichevski insisted that Israel will “be saved” only “when another teaching is given unto us, namely: whoever walks by the way and sees a fine tree and a fine field and leaves them to think on other thoughts – that man is like one who forfeits his life!” Berdichevski cried: “Give us back our fine trees and fine fields! Give us back the Universe!”

This cry is more than a plea to return to the land. This is a call to reevaluate your personal life and your environment. This is a call for purifying, electrifying revolution.

The Zionist revolution defied the twentieth-century trend toward individualism and the Jewish trend toward sectarianism. Zionism was communitarian, and it sought to resurrect a more integrated, authentic Judaism and Jew. In the second decade of the twentieth century, Jacob Klatzkin rejected the Enlightenment's ideological hairsplitting. “To be a Jew means the acceptance of neither a religious nor an ethical creed,” he insisted, dismissing the false choices we still use to distort Judaism. “We are neither a denomination nor a school of thought, but members of one

family, bearers of a common history." And it is no coincidence that *Hatikvah*, the national anthem, THE one, ancient enduring Hope, like so many Jewish prayers, speaks of abstractions as singular, but the people as collective: It is THE Jewish spirit that still sings and it is THE eyes that seek out Zion, but "OUR" hope of two thousand years, to be a free nation in OUR Land.

As an enlightened movement that disdained much of ghetto Judaism, Zionism is best remembered for repudiating Judaism's religious dimension. At its most extreme it offered a mirror image of the Napoleon Sanhedrin solution and the approach of some Reformers, stripping away everything but the national identity. For some Zionists, rather than being Frenchmen or Englishmen or Russians of the Mosaic persuasion, the goal was to be Jews of the European persuasion. Theoretically, once freed of the specter of anti-Semitism, the Jew could flourish as a cultivated human being, meaning a European, away from Europeans. The most infamous example of this was Theodor Herzl's consideration of the British offer of a homeland in Uganda. But the most significant lesson from that episode is how roundly that idea was repudiated – how deeply Jewish, what we should call, on some levels, religious, most Zionists were. "Judaism is fundamentally national," the Russian-born cultural Zionist Ahad Ha'am insisted, "and all the efforts of the 'Reformers' to separate the Jewish religion from its national element have no result except to ruin both the nationalism and the religion."

YOU CANNOT TAKE THE ZION OUT OF ZIONISM

Zionism was a typically schizophrenic product of the typically schizophrenic nineteenth century wherein rationalism and romanticism competed and coexisted. Zionism in part was as abstract as the *Wissenschaft*, the intellectual German Jewish initiative to study Jewish history systematically. Each movement reflected a different combination of the epoch's rationalist, liberal, scientific, and nationalist sentiments. But Zionism was also fundamentalist and spiritual, which was essential to its success. Zionism was a passionate, romantic, religious movement even at its most secular.

And in fact, most secular Zionists could not take the Zion out of Zionism. Their nationalism was deeply Jewish, and thus incontestably religious. (Similarly, today's "secular" Israelis, for all their hostility to religion, are far more tied into the Jewish religious calendar, the holy language, the sacred Jewish texts, than many of their most pious American cousins).

Among the first Zionist pioneers, the "Biluim" were characteristically secular. Rejecting the "*sha-shtill*" quiescence of their parents and rabbis, appalled by what Judaism had become, they moved to Israel in 1882 – a decade before Herzl's epiphany. Yet these gruff pioneers called themselves Bilu (BYLU), an acronym based on the Biblical verse – "*Beit Yaakov Lechu V'Nelcha*" – House of Jacob, arise and go forth. Their manifesto rejecting the false dream of "assimilation," turning Eastward not Westward, was written in Biblical language and appealed to "thine ancient pride," remembering that "thou wast a nation possessing a wise religion, a law, a constitution, a celestial Temple, whose wall [the Western wall] is still a silent witness to the glories of the past."

STATE-BUILDING AND MYTH-MAKING

Thus began a glorious exercise in state-building, and, yes, in nationalist myth-making. The hearty *chalutzim*, the heroic pioneers, came to the land "*livnot u'libanot bah*," to build it and be rebuilt. They drained swamps, paved roads, founded kibbutzim. They revitalized old cities, such as Jerusalem and established new cities, such as Tel Aviv, the refreshing "hill of spring." There were fiascoes along the way. Many individuals, thrust from the Russian winters into sizzling hot summers, withered. Some of the land that the pioneers meticulously purchased in good conscience was sold by absentee Arab landlords, which made for very disgruntled – and displaced – Arab neighbors. A few generations later, modern scientists would even discover that the sweeping Eucalyptus trees that helped drain the swamps were environmentally problematic. Nevertheless, it was an heroic and revolutionary endeavor. These people were translating ideas into action, these people were shaping the future of Israel, and the Jewish people.

Forty years after the Biluim, and many failures and successes later, the great poet Chaim Nahman Bialik offered a similar tribute to the rationalism and passion, the nationalism and revitalized religionism, the modernism and the traditionalism, so central to most Zionism. January 4, 1925 marked a great moment in the development of the fledgling nation-state – the founding of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The opening of this university testified to the rationalist, scientific side of Zionism, and also to a certain comfort level – if you can stop draining swamps and toiling in the field to study, you are well on your way to building a sophisticated nation-state.

Bialik, who made his reputation with his poetry of oppression, of misery, of exile, now offered some prose of liberation. Standing on Mount

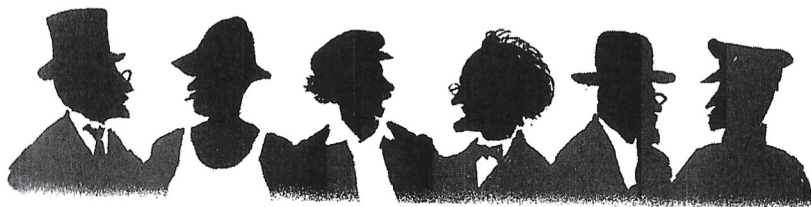
Scopus with its breathtaking view of Jerusalem's cobblestone alleyways and ancient walls, Bialik played on the notion of this new university joining a long line of "nationalist schools in all its forms" – the *heder* (a one room Torah school for young Eastern European boys), the *yeshiva* (a grand institution of Torah study), the *bet midrash* (smaller study houses, often linked with synagogues). As in his poem "City of Slaughter," the Enlightened poet again used Biblical language, this time to celebrate this modern "festival," and to synthesize the rough-hewn pioneers with their pale, intellectual cousins, to link the secular workers with the religious dreamers. Speaking of the pioneers, and invoking the traditional Jewish concept of the Jerusalem on high and the Jerusalem below, he cried:

"Let those youths build the Earthly Jerusalem with fire and let them who work within these walls build the Heavenly Jerusalem with fire, and between them let them build and establish our House of Life. 'For thou, O Lord, did consume it with fire, and with fire Thou will rebuild it.'"

CONTENDING SCHOOLS OF ZIONIST THOUGHT

In some ways, Bialik's address is misleading, it marked a precious but rare moment of compatibility between religious and political Zionism, a cease-fire from the factionalism endemic to the movement then and now. But one of the hallmarks of Zionist vitality, and perhaps, one of its keys to success, was its many clashing schools of thought. Zionist denominationalism was passionate, divisive, but also strangely constructive. It allowed many different people to find a foothold in this vast nation-building project. The key to Zionism's future popularity was its relative universality – like the Torah it offered many ways in, many paths to understanding and fulfillment. And, at a certain point, it became "apple pie," a sentimental rallying point and unifying point.

Still, it is worth taking a guided tour of the major Zionist denominations with two goals in mind, first, to see what ideas ultimately united them all; and second, to see how the divisions animated the debate and may offer models for our own times.



POLITICAL ZIONISM is the Zionism of Theodor Herzl, of the European scientist Chaim Weizmann and the American jurist Louis Brandeis. Its primary focus was securing a state to save Jewish lives – but in emphasizing Jewish normalcy, it sought to allow Jews to cultivate their enlightened and traditional selves.

LABOR ZIONISM is the Zionism of the kibbutz and the moshav, of rebuilding the Jewish self by reconnecting with the land – and grounding the excessively intellectual European Jew in the challenging practicalities of agriculture. While deeply secular, Labor Zionism fostered an enduring love for Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel, and turned thousands of kibbutznikim into Bible-quoting amateur archaeologists – a passion it is hard to believe would have sprouted in Uganda.

SOCIALIST ZIONISM harnessed the messianic tradition, the commitment to *Tikun Olam*, fixing the world by fostering justice, to build a vision of Israel as a Socialist vanguard. Like the secular Marxist Bundists, Socialist Zionists were too realistic about the unpopularity of the Jewish people in Europe – and the particular needs of Jews – to expect class consciousness to unite all workers and trump anti-Semitism. Instead, they hoped their small land, their virtuous people, would serve as exemplars to the world.

CULTURAL ZIONISM, the Zionism of Ahad Ha'am, offers perhaps the most relevant blueprint for contemporary Israel-Diaspora relations. With a literate Eastern European Jew's love of Jewish culture, Ahad Ha'am saw Israel as the spiritual, intellectual, cultural, and religious center of the Jewish people. Israel would be the center of the wheel, connected to each Diaspora community by spokes. The simple existence of the Jewish state would make the Diaspora Jew stronger, prouder, and freer.

RELIGIOUS ZIONISM saw no contradiction between "Orthodoxy" and Zionism. Religious Zionists understood that only in the land of the forefathers could all the *mitzvot*, commandments, be fulfilled. Religious Zionists viewed Zionism as an essential corrective to the violence done to Jewish coherence by Napoleon's Sanhedrin and all the fragmenting reformers in its wake.

Led by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Religious Zionists embraced the political state as the pathway to mystical salvation. "The state is not the supreme happiness of man," Kook taught. This denial applies to "an

ordinary state that amounts to no more than a large insurance company, where the myriad ideas that are the crown of human vitality remain hovering above, not touching it." But Israel is no insurance company. This state "is ideal in its foundation.... This state is truly supreme in the scale of happiness, and this state is our state, the state of Israel, the foundation of God's throne in the world. Its entire aim is that 'God be one and His name one' (*Zechariah*, 14:9)."

REVISIONIST ZIONISM: The name adopted by maximalist critics of the post-Herzl Zionist establishment in the 1920s who wanted to revise Zionist policies not Zionism itself. While even more pragmatic and anti-Semitism-obsessed than political Zionists, the followers of Ze'ev Jabotinsky and other revisionists had a deep appreciation for the power of national symbols, which, in this case, are inherently and authentically Jewish. Revisionists were European romantics, Garibaldi-style nationalists, passionate about peoplehood, their common past, and their homeland. It is quite characteristic, therefore, that the first Revisionist elected Prime Minister, Menachem Begin, began his tenure by praying at the Western Wall. With this move, Begin began a now-venerable tradition that recognizes how deeply Jewish, how deeply religious, most Zionism is, and most Zionists are, often despite themselves.

It is easy to forget that, initially, Zionism was dwarfed by the mass migration to America. And the emigration to America triggered its own intellectual ferment. Still, on paper, Zionism offered a recipe for Jewish renewal that the American migration never did. In fact, most Americans bought into the Protestant notion that Judaism is "just" a religion and that each individual hews his own idiosyncratic path to God and goodness. This approach helped foster great individual successes in America while causing some of the communal failures that have triggered today's Jewish identity crisis.