

## Religious Roots of a Political Ideology: Judaism and Christianity at the Cradle of Zionism

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### Abstract

Albeit overtly secular, Zionist ideology was inspired by religious thought. While traditional religions often supported the nationalist cause, the relationship of Judaism and Zionism is vastly different. Adepts of traditional Judaism immediately rejected Zionism, and this rejectionist attitude has not vanished to this day. On the other hand, Christian, mainly Protestant theologians had developed the idea of the ingathering of the Jews in the Holy Land several centuries prior to the first Zionist congress in 1897. This explains why the initially socialist oriented secular project of social transformation has undergone sacralization, becoming a focal point of Evangelical Christian Zionists. These Evangelical contributions to Zionism and the Zionist state must be taken into account in analyses of the State of Israel, its position in the modern Middle East and the policy-making of those countries where such Evangelical circles wield significant influence.

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Zionism is one of the more recent ideologies that set out to transform society. Zionists, and the State of Israel they created, represent a revolution in Jewish history, a revolution that began with the emancipation and the secularization of the Jews of Europe. Like all revolutions, Zionism was inspired by earlier ideas, and this paper explores Judaic and Christian sources of that inspiration. Secularization of Jewish life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries revolutionized Jewish identity, turning a once normative concept, Jewishness, into a purely descriptive one. Traditional Jews can be distinguished by what they do or should do; the new Jews by what they are. This split of identity, which has continued for almost two centuries, obliges us today to distinguish the adjective “Jewish” from “Judaic”. The term “Judaic” as used in this article refers to a normative meaning of Judaism, i.e. a religion with its spiritual and ritual aspects, making a claim on continuity rather than rupture. Conversely, the much broader term “Jewish” relates to Jews, their actions and ideas, regardless of their connection with Judaism. While some scholars maintain that Judaism became a religion in the Christian sense of the word only when Jews met modernity in Western Europe (Barnitzky 2011), it is beyond doubt that Judaic belief and practice had been fundamental to what it meant to be a Jew well before then.

Zionism has so drastically transformed Jewish life that the very word “Israel” has changed its meaning. According to Jacob Neusner, a rabbi, Zionist activist and one of the most prolific American academic interpreters of Judaism:

The word “Israel” today generally refers to the overseas political nation, the State of Israel. When people say, “I am going to Israel,” they mean a trip to Tel Aviv or Jerusalem.... But the word “Israel” in Scripture and in the canonical writings of the religion, Judaism, speaks of the holy community that God has called forth through Abraham and Sarah, to which God has given the Torah (“teaching”) at Mount Sinai.... The Psalmists and the Prophets, the sages of Judaism in all ages, the prayers that Judaism teaches, all use the word “Israel” to mean “the holy community.” Among most Judaisms, to be “Israel” means to model life in the image, after the likeness, of God, who is made manifest in the Torah. Today “Israel” in synagogue worship speaks of that holy community, but “Israel” in Jewish community affairs means “the State of Israel.” (Neusner 2002: 3-4)



Neusner goes on to conclude that “the state has become more important than the Jews,” (p. 4) and to underscore the identity shift that many Jews have experienced over the last century, as they moved from being a *community of faith* toward forming a *community of fate*.

Among the many tendencies within Zionism, the one that has become dominant set out to reach four principal objectives: 1) to transform the transnational Jewish identity centred on the Torah into a national identity proper to ethnic nationalisms then common in Central and Eastern Europe; 2) to develop a new national vernacular based on biblical and rabbinic Hebrew; 3) to transfer the Jews from their countries of origin to Palestine; and 4) to establish political and economic control over the “new old land,” if need be by force. While other nationalists needed only to wrest control of their countries from imperial powers to become “masters in their own houses,” Zionists faced the far greater challenge of trying to achieve all these objectives simultaneously.

## From Theory to Practice

Zionism was a bold attempt at forced modernization; most of its ideological factions aimed at bringing modernity to a country they considered backward and longing for redemption by European settlers. The State of Israel still stands as the challenge of European-style modernization in the Middle East. In order to grasp the complexity pervading any discussion of Zionism, it is necessary to understand *Haskalah*, a movement to bring about enlightenment and modernization by means of secularization, that is, by full-scale liberation from the “yoke of the Torah and of its commandments.” *Haskalah* has affected most Jews in the last two centuries. To speak of the Jews before the nineteenth century is to refer to a normative concept: a Jew is someone whose behavior must by definition embody a certain number of principles and rituals of Judaism, the common denominator for all the Jews. Such a Jew may transgress the Torah but does not reject its validity. “You shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6) remains a commandment, a vocation and an aspiration. In line with the tradition of non-literal



interpretation proper to Rabbinic Judaism, this appeal is understood as an obligation to strive for ritual, moral and spiritual self-improvement. Secularization has largely eliminated this sense of obligation and facilitated cultural assimilation of Jews into the ambient society.

A few, mainly assimilated Jews of Central Europe became interested in Jewish nationalism in the last decades of the nineteenth century. In the wake of their formal emancipation, some of them aspired to high society but felt excluded and rejected from such company. They, and often their parents, no longer obeyed the commandments of the Torah and knew next to nothing of the normative aspects of Judaism. However, their attempts at assimilation had failed to produce the anticipated social and psychological benefits, and to bring them the satisfaction of total acceptance. In other words, “Zionism was an invention of intellectuals and assimilated Jews... who turned their back on the rabbis and aspired to modernity, seeking desperately for a remedy for their existential anxiety” (Barnavi 2000: 218).

Yet, individual frustrations alone, no matter how powerful, were not enough to give birth to a successful political movement. Such a movement could only have gathered sufficient strength where social and political conditions were thoroughly unfavourable to the Jews as a group. The true potential of practical Zionism was not in Central but in Eastern Europe, particularly in the confines of Imperial Russia.

The tsarist regime maintained most Jews in the Pale of Settlement, at a distance from the centers of Russian culture and their undeniable attractions. This is why secularization did not bring about the widespread assimilation of Russia’s Jews. While giving up their loyalty to the Torah, these secular Jews developed a “proto-national character and a national outlook” (Leibowitz 1995: 132) that had made many of them particularly susceptible to Zionist ideas. The Jews of Russia possessed at least two of the attributes of a “normal” nation: a common territory (the Pale of Settlement) and a common language (Yiddish). While several other national movements –e.g. Polish, Lithuanian and Finnish– were gathering momentum, Zionism gained dominance mainly as a reaction to the murderous antisemitism that afflicted Europe during the first half of the twentieth century. These circumstances exemplify Isaiah Berlin’s “bent twig” theory of the birth of modern nationalisms (Berlin 1972).

Even though only one percent of turn-of-the-century Russian Jewish



emigrants were eventually to make their way to Palestine (the majority chose North America), Russian nationals formed the hard core of Zionist activism. Zionism in Russia drew its impetus from among the *Maskilim*, followers of the Haskalah, Jews educated in the *yeshivas* who had acquired some notions of European culture, usually without formal education.

Zionism rode on the wave of secularization to foster the nationalist sentiments. With respect to Jews in Eastern Europe, Zionists followed in the footsteps of their European predecessors, who also benefited from secularization to “construct nationhoods.” (Hastings 1997). The Zionist idea was something entirely new, a break with millennia of Jewish tradition—which explains the reluctance of most Jews at the time to accept it. Most secular Jews, like most religious Jews, in the world were not Zionists at the turn of the twentieth century. Even in the Russian Empire the acceptance of Zionism was anything but natural. It required a deep shift in the collective consciousness of the Jews. The Zionists had to resort to “mass education,” convinced that they were spreading the truth to bring this shift about.

Zionists were very consistent in grafting nationalism onto these secular identities. It has been argued that “the revamped [i.e. Zionist] definition of the Jewish identity was not built upon the secularization of Judaism but on the secularization of Christianity”, i.e. on the recent history of Christians and Christian countries (Piterberg 2008: 247). The national identity of the Jew was not only “invented” (Sand 2009); it was molded to conform to the European Christian prototype. The invention of Jewish nationalism significantly differed from similar initiatives elsewhere in Europe (Anderson 1991), where, e.g. in Poland, Catholicism was the linchpin of the national sentiment. Conversely, Zionism had to overcome almost unanimous resistance from religious authorities ranging from the Orthodox to the Reform (Rabkin 2006).

## “Ingathering the Seed of Abraham”

There exists abundant scholarly and polemical literature on the historical roots of Christian Zionism (Tuchman 1956, Sharif 1983, and Sizer 2007). Christian support for Jewish “Restoration” to Palestine, on biblical, theological or



political grounds preceded secular Jewish Zionism by nearly four centuries and paved the way for the latter's rise in the late nineteenth century" (Masalha 2007: 85). This history explains the immense emotional support that the State of Israel has enjoyed among many Protestant Christians.

Similarities between Zionism and Protestantism are rooted in literalism, i.e. non-figurative and non-traditional interpretations of the Bible. One may recall that the return to the Old Testament (*sola scriptura*), which de-emphasizes the role of sacred tradition, is the foundational principle of the Protestant Reformation. According to the Israeli historian Anita Shapira, "there is a parallel between Protestantism's approach to sacred texts and the Jewish [i.e. Zionists'] attitude to biblical literalism" (Shapira 2004: 33).

In the wake of the European Reformation, the universalist concept of the Church as "the New Israel" was nationalized to identify several, sometimes competing, groups of Christian colonizers bent on bringing the Bible to the heathens around the world, from the Americas to Oceania. At the same time, the Jews in Protestant Europe came to be seen not only as foreigners, but rather as Palestinians who should be in due time brought back to Palestine. The earliest book to propose a Restoration of the Jews to Palestine was published by an Anglican priest in 1585 (Masalha 2007: 89). It posited the centrality of creating a Jewish state as a means of fulfilling biblical prophecies.

Christian motives –the ingathering of Jews in the Holy Land as a means to hasten the Second Coming– seem to be more prominent in the Zionist project than Judaic ones. An independent return of "the Jewish nation" to the Holy Land is alien to Rabbinic Judaism but remains essential to Christian theology. As early as the seventeenth century, one can find Protestant references to the "restoration of the national Israel", "national restitution of Israel" and "the return of Israel to their own land" (Vereté 1972: 17). These references ignore the historical reality, namely the fact that most Jews exiled from Spain in the late fifteenth century, during the Christian Reconquest of the peninsula, dispersed throughout the Ottoman Empire while only a minute number of them settled in the Land of Israel. Yet Palestine was then part of the Ottoman Empire, which welcomed them generously within its borders.

Millenarian beliefs spread rapidly in the seventeenth century and gained popularity in spite of persecutions on the part of mainstream churches. A century later, Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), renowned scientist and theologian,



attempted to convince British rabbis to organise a transfer of Jews to Palestine. The rabbis demurred, citing Jeremiah's call on the Israelites to work for the welfare of their countries of residence (Sharif 1983: 39). In spite of the total lack of interest on the part of the Jews, Protestant belief in the Restoration of the Seed of Abraham to the Promised Land became firmly implanted in the English-speaking lands on both sides of the Atlantic. At the same time, prominent members of the British and American elites, for example Lloyd George (1863-1945), convinced of the historical veracity of the Bible, admitted that they knew biblical history and the geography of Palestine better than they knew the history and geography of their own countries.

Colonial interests reinforced biblical sensitivities. The idea of a Jewish state under a British protectorate began circulating in Europe well before this idea attracted any significant group of Jews. The first British Consulate was inaugurated in Jerusalem in 1838. Two years later, the influential Lord Shaftsbury (1801-1885) published a memorandum to the Protestant monarchs of Europe, which transformed a theological project into a political one. Lord Palmerston (1784-1865) personally approached Queen Victoria with a plan to colonize the Holy Land with Jews while deporting the locals to create living space for Jewish settlers. Restoration of the Jews had also inflamed literary creativity, and novels such as *Daniel Deronda* by George Eliot (1819-1880) and *The Land of Gilead* by Laurence Oliphant (1829-1888) made the idea popular among the reading public in the British Empire and the United States.

The antisemitic belief that Jews do not belong to Europe but, rather, to Palestine was not limited to the English-speaking realm. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) referred to the Jews as "Palestinians living among us" while Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) suggested conquering the Holy Land in order to send all the Jews there (Sharif 1983: 56-9). During the Egyptian campaign, Napoleon called on the Jews to settle in Palestine under the protection of French troops.

It was William Hechler, the Anglican chaplain of the British Embassy in Vienna, who greatly inspired Theodor Herzl, more conversant with Christian than Judaic concepts, to embark on the ingathering of Jews in Palestine (Duvernoy 1996). (There seems to be little substance to the oft-repeated claim that Herzl's Zionism was aroused by the Dreyfus trial. (Kornberg 1980)) Hechler's Christian influence apparently played a significant role in the



Zionist awakening of the rather de-Judaized Herzl. A book published in Israel analyzes this role in great detail. In his preface to the book, André Chouraqui, former Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem and a life-long Zionist activist, recalls that Herzl initially wanted to convert the Jews of Vienna to Catholicism and only later sought the ingathering of the Jews, firmly guided by Hechler, who urged him not to abandon his mission (Duvernoy 1996: 3-4).

Pleas for the Restoration of the Jews were often accompanied with expressions of anti-Jewish sentiments. In the nineteenth century, when antisemitism was established as a popular movement, its adepts could be found among the most enthusiastic supporters of the Zionist project. Herzl, who finally spread the gospel of Restoration to the Jews, considered antisemites his movement's best "friends and allies" (Segev 2000: 47), and throughout his short diplomatic career he consistently sought to attract to his cause prominent antisemites (such as Konstantin Pobedonostsev (1827-1907), a close adviser to tsars Alexander III and Nicolas II). Significantly, Lord Balfour (1848-1930), the author of the Balfour Declaration, had imposed limitations on immigration of Jews to Britain a few years before declaring his country's support for the Zionist project. In fact, Balfour's support for Zionism was bitterly criticized by prominent Jews in Britain, who plainly called it antisemitic (Montagu 1917).

Antisemitism and Zionism, far from being mutually exclusive, actually reinforce one another. This is certainly the case of the adepts of Dispensationalism, an Evangelical group that took root in Britain in the late nineteenth century, and constitutes the most active Christian Zionist movement nowadays, claiming to have over 50 million supporters in the United States. Founded by the disgruntled Anglican clergyman John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), this movement proclaimed that the Church, which he considered irredeemably corrupt, would be replaced by a reinvigorated nation of Israel, the initial recipient of Divine revelation. This theology emphasizes bloody apocalyptic battles to take place in Israel, resulting in the ultimate victory of Good over Evil. As part of this scenario, a few thousand Jews would bow down before Jesus and be saved while the rest of the Jews, whose ingathering in the Promised Land would be indispensable for the Second Coming to occur, would simply perish.

Christian advocates of Israel argue that radical Islam, rather than the "facts



on the ground” created by the Zionist movement and, later, by the Israeli government, is at the core of the conflict in the Middle East. This has become the main message of the Israel lobbies around the world who rely more and more on Christian evangelical groups for political support of Israel (Gorenberg 2002; Sizer 2004). However, just as in the case of other religious denominations, including Jews, Christians are deeply divided on the issue of Israel and Palestine, with leaders such as Bishop Desmond Tutu taking a critical view of Israel’s behaviour.

## Zionist Uses of Religion

The core set of values and principles known as Rabbinic Judaism has defined Jewish life for nearly two millennia, even though most Jews today no longer follow its ritual precepts. Rabbinic Judaism is largely based on the Oral Torah, usually considered to consist of Midrash, Mishna, Talmud and Responsa, redacted since the second century CE. The legitimacy of the Oral Torah for pious Jews reflects the belief that it was given on Mount Sinai at the same time as the Written Torah. In jurisprudence the Oral Torah clearly takes precedence, interpreting biblical passages in what may be considered a very broad manner. For example, the biblical prohibition of work on the Sabbath has come to mean 39 types of labor, which are originally mentioned in a rather different context but in adjacent verses. The Oral Torah has invariably interpreted the injunction “eye for an eye” to mean monetary compensation, rather than extracting an eye of the offender. This anti-literalist approach to Scripture distinguishes Rabbinic Judaism from the Karaites, now almost extinct, and from Protestant Zionist denominations gaining momentum nowadays.

The interpretation by the Oral Torah of the annihilation of Jerusalem by the forces of Rome has, ever since, defined the usual normative Jewish attitude toward force, resistance and the Land of Israel within the context of Jewish continuity. Traditional Judaism views the fate of the Jews as contingent on their own actions in the framework of the Covenant between God and His people. The tragedies suffered by the Jews, particularly the exile from the Promised Land, can thus be seen as punishment meant to expiate their sins. To



bring about relief the Jew must repent, rather than rely on military or political action, which would only defy divine providence.

Rabbinic Judaism, developed over two millennia, abhors wars and specifically forbids fomenting conflict with non-Jews (Rabkin 2006: 93-134). Jewish tradition for the last two millennia has been rather pacifist, interpreting the destruction of the Temple and the exile that followed as divine punishment for transgressions committed by the Jews. Therefore the Oral Torah is laconic on the details of the military activities that accompanied the Roman siege of Jerusalem in the first century. But it clearly emphasizes the principal lesson: the Temple was destroyed because of the sins of the Jews, and primarily because of gratuitous hatred among the Jews themselves (*Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate “Yoma”, p. 9b). Tradition also condemns the advocates of armed struggle and praises those who set themselves apart from the defenders of the city. The Talmud and several classical exegetes reproached those who favored armed struggle in particularly severe terms. Bearing in mind the central position of the Temple in Judaism, the accusation is a serious one, and has stood for centuries as a warning against any temptation to use force. At the same time, there remain enough ambiguities to allow variant readings of the tradition in recent years (Eisen 2011).

However, the founding fathers of Zionism, for whom “the authority of history replaced the authority of God” (Piterberg 2008: 96), deemed the tradition, in whatever reading, irrelevant since, in their view, Jewish history in the last two millennia was reduced to a series of persecutions of a weak minority that led to –and justified– the Zionist settlement in Palestine.

Judaic ritual is replete with entreaties for God to return Jews to the Land. Yet few would argue that the conflict in the Holy Land was caused by religious imperatives. Shlomo Avineri, the author of an authoritative intellectual history of Zionism remarks:

Jews did not relate to the vision of the Return in a more active way than most Christians viewed the Second Coming. As a symbol of belief, integration, and group identity it was a powerful component of the value system; but as an activating element of historical praxis and changing reality through history, it was wholly quietistic. (Avineri 1981: 4)



Avineri acknowledges that it would be, to use his own words, “banal, conformist and apologetic” to link Zionism to the Jewish tradition’s “close ties with the Land of Israel”. As will be explained further on, the proud “return to history” that has enthused many an ideologist of Zionism is at variance with Jewish tradition that sees Jews as impacting history through pious deeds and prayer.

At its birth no attempt was made to clothe Zionism in religious garb. Its activists were almost exclusively atheists and agnostics. Even two rabbis usually enlisted by those intent on rooting their Zionism in Judaism –Zvi Hirsch Kalischer (1795-1874) and Yehuda Salomon Hai Alkalai (1798-1878)– proved to be more inspired by the heady atmosphere of nineteenth-century European nationalism than by the Jewish tradition. They often referred to honor and pride, which makes them remote from the discourse of Jewish tradition:

Why do the people of Italy and of other countries sacrifice their lives for the land of their fathers, while we, like men bereft of strength and courage, do nothing? Are we inferior to all other peoples, who have no regard for life and fortune as compared with the love of their land and nation? Let us take to heart the examples of the Italians, Poles, and Hungarians, who laid down their lives and possessions in the struggles for national independence, while we, the children of Israel, who have the most glorious and holiest of lands as our inheritance, are spiritless and silent. Should we not be ashamed of ourselves? (Avineri 1998: 4)

Indeed, the actual hostilities of 1947-1949 (*Milhemet ha-shihzur*; War of Liberation in the Israeli-Zionist vocabulary, and *Nakba*, catastrophe, in the Palestinian one) were not waged under religious banners and did not pursue religious goals. For the Zionists, it was a war for territory, where they would constitute a majority and thereby control it. While the expulsions and dispossessions of Christian and Muslim Palestinians in 1948 may appear to have followed religious identity markers (Muslim and Christian Palestinians were targeted while Jewish Palestinians, even the most anti-Zionist among them, were spared), these measures were neither conceived, nor articulated in Judaic terms but, rather, in line with the European-styled ethnic nationalism of the founding



fathers of Zionism.

Those who object to the application of the word “ethnic” to this conflict argue that the concept of “the Jewish people” was invented by and for the Zionists (Sand 2009). But even accepting Sand’s argument, one would still not define the origins of the Israel/Palestine conflict as “religious,” albeit Judaism has certainly been used to firm up the Zionists’ claim on Palestine.

At the same time, Judaism has served as a fallback identity marker and a refuge for a few prominent Zionists disappointed with their ideology and its practical realizations. Nathan Birnbaum, the inventor of the term “Zionism” and an ally of Herzl, and, a century later, Avrum Burg, a former speaker of the Israeli parliament, both chaired the World Zionist Organisation before publicly rejecting Zionism and affirming Jewish values as the basis of their personal identity (Burg 2007; Fishman 1987).

Two concomitant processes have been at work from the very inception of Zionism: sacralization of the secular and the secularization of the sacred, i.e. “assigning religious meanings to secular ideas, thereby treating them as sacred”, and redefinition of religious terms to “accommodate secular ideas” (Tepe 2008: 55).

These processes are embodied in National Judaism (*dati leumi*), which sprang from the Mizrahi movement established in the early twentieth century in Eastern Europe. It was originally rejected by most Jews, particularly those identifying with Rabbinic Judaism (Rabkin 2006: 66). These initially marginal streams of Judaic interpretation embraced Zionism and the idea of armed struggle. This doctrine draws its inspiration from the mystical thought of Rabbi Kook, seen as “radical and revolutionary” even by Zionist historians (Avineri 1981: 188). The development of this movement has been momentous since the 1967 war when Israel overtly assumed the role of a colonial and imperial state (Penslar 2007: 111).

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), born in Imperial Russia, was appointed as the Chief Rabbi of the Ashkenazi community in Palestine by the British. Fascinated by the idealism and self-sacrifice of the Zionist pioneers, Rabbi Kook looked forward to “an ideal state, upon whose being sublime ideals would be engraved,” a state that would become “the pedestal of God’s throne in this world.” For him, the state would be the earthly expression of a messianic “Kingdom of Israel,” a Jacob’s ladder uniting earth with heaven



(Ravitzky 1996: 131-37). The great majority of rabbis (and, needless to say, secular Israelis) rejected Rabbi Kook's efforts to portray the Zionists as the “white ass” who will carry the Messiah into Jerusalem. Inspired by the romantic nationalism in Russia, he anticipated that love of the land would have a mystical influence on the intrepid pioneers and bring the new secular Hebrew back to tradition. He believed that the upsurge of secularism was a “passing illness” that the return to the Land of Israel should rapidly cure. This belief became essential to those rabbis who sought a rationale for their collaboration with the Zionists. While a century later such hopes have yet to come true, some adepts of National Judaism continue to believe that “the subjective reality of modern world politics will finally become revealed as an objective halakhic fact” (Berkowitz 1994: 40).

Zionists of almost all streams agree that the Jews had to become strong and return to their biblical pre-exilic history, by overcoming the entire two thousand years experience of exile. Their return to the Promised Land would return them to normalcy, and make them “like all the nations”, a concept clearly disapproved of in the Bible (1 Samuel 8: 20). This Zionist emphasis on return is not only at variance with the Jewish tradition but “can, and should, be located at the intersection of Protestantism and antisemitism” (Piterberg 2008: 257). It reflects established Christian conceptions of the Jews, who are seen as excluded from history until and unless they recognize Jesus as the Messiah. The Jews have lost their *raison d'être*, they can at best survive but not thrive, and their ultimate fate is to disappear from the face of the earth or to embrace Christianity.

This has not deterred Zionist leaders from mobilizing Christian support based on the belief that the restoration of the Jews in the Holy Land is a prelude to the Second Coming (Vereté 1972; Sharif 1976). This reliance on Christian motives in the Zionist project was proved uniquely effective with the issuing of the Balfour Declaration in 1917, whose author not only worked to limit the immigration of Jews to England but also shared these Latter Day prophecies.

This resort to Christian values should not be seen as cynical manipulation but, rather, as a meeting of the minds. Ben-Gurion (1886-1973) exemplifies this affinity in his approach to Scripture. He disdained the rabbinic tradition, affirming the right to interpret the written Torah directly through the



experience of Zionist settlement (Ben-Gurion 1972: 85-87). At times, he and Israeli politicians make symbolic use of the Bible to gain international, usually Christian, support (Masalha 2007). The overtly agnostic Ben-Gurion would point to a copy of the Pentateuch in order to justify the Zionist claim to the Land in front of a British commission of inquiry. The language of redemption is omnipresent in most versions of Zionist ideology, and Judaic concepts and texts (such as the Book of Joshua) have been harnessed to reach nationalist objectives. The founding fathers of Zionism combined this political use of Judaism with explicit disdain for Judaic practice, continuity and tradition.

Ben-Gurion's Laborites made a particularly coherent use of redemptive imagery, using, for example, the expression *geulat haaretz* (redemption of the land), to signify the purchase of Arab land by Jews. This transubstantiation of the language of redemption, of religious values into secular concepts, infused the Zionist pioneers, who saw themselves as the vanguard of the Jewish people, fashioning history with their own hands. Moreover, the use of Judaic terms familiar to the Jewish masses of Eastern Europe facilitated the propagation of Zionist ideology, which, though radical, retained some traditional forms in order to appease widespread apprehension and opposition.

The Israeli political scientist Zeev Sternhell calls the Zionist uses of Judaism "a religion without God" which has preserved only its outward symbols (Sternhell 1998: 56). While political applications of Protestant principles can be found in the Constitution of the United States, the Founding Fathers mostly remained practicing Christians. However, according to the Israeli historian Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, the Zionists were atheists who claimed: "God does not exist, and he promised us this land."

Political usage of spiritual terms by otherwise atheist leaders is a contemporary phenomenon. This kind of use was condemned by Pope Pius XI who warned in 1937 in his encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* (*With burning anxiety*): "You will need to watch carefully, Venerable Brethren, that religious fundamental concepts be not emptied of their content and distorted to profane use" (Vatican 1937). The active political mobilization of Judaic concepts to justify indefinite occupation of the territories conquered in 1967 has provoked bitter criticism in Israel from both religious (Leibowitz 1995) and secular (Rubinstein 1984) intellectuals, who otherwise approve of the Zionist project on political and social grounds. Surprisingly, Jewish detractors of Zionism,



who insist on the alleged divergence of Judaic and Zionist worldviews, have largely ignored the apparently non-Jewish origins of Jewish nationalism, which would have offered them a potent argument, at least among those Jews who view Christianity with suspicion.

## Jewish Detractors of Zionism

Most people almost automatically associate Judaism and Zionism. The press routinely calls Israel “the Jewish State.” Israeli politicians often speak “in the name of the Jewish people.” What could be more normal than to see Jewish religion as the foundation of the birth, some would say rebirth, of the State of Israel? Are not the Jews of the Diaspora often seen as aliens, outsiders or perhaps even Israeli citizens taking a long holiday far from “home”? Comparisons of Jewish Zionists' attitudes to Israel with the way other diasporas relate to their former countries miss important differences. Unlike Italians in North America whose immediate ancestors came from Italy (or who came from Italy themselves), most American and Canadian Jews came from Europe, not Israel/Palestine. Unlike these Italians who speak or spoke Italian, these Jews and their ancestors spoke Yiddish, not Hebrew, for the simple reason that Hebrew had not been spoken for many centuries. These Jewish immigrants' eating habits developed in Eastern Europe had nothing to do with Middle Eastern fare, such as falafel, nowadays considered the quintessential Israeli food. Many Jews' perception of themselves as being somehow a diaspora of today's Israel is a particularly interesting case of “imagined communities. (Anderson)” Of course the way the nearly one million Israeli expatriates relate to their home country does resemble the attitude of Italian and other diasporas around the world.

Ever since the creation of their political movement more than a century ago, Zionists have claimed to be the vanguard of the entire Jewish people. Some of them even assert that any threat to the survival of the State of Israel is a threat to the survival of Jews throughout the world. For them, Israel has become not only the guarantor of Jewish survival but also the standard-bearer of Judaism. Reality, in the event, is far more complex.



From the beginning, Zionism, widely understood as a point of rupture in Jewish history, provoked rejection on the part of most Jews. Critics of Zionism among them represent the entire gamut of contemporary Jewish experience. The Zionist movement and the creation of the State of Israel have caused one of the greatest schisms in Jewish continuity. An overwhelming majority of those who defended and interpreted the traditions of Judaism had opposed what was to become a vision for a new society, a new concept of being Jewish, a program of massive immigration to the Holy Land and the use of force to establish political hegemony there. Today, while overt rejection of Zionism has clearly abated among Jews, younger cohorts continue to desert the ranks of Israel's Jewish supporters (Goldstein 2011).

The number of active religious opponents to Zionism has remained relatively small, perhaps no more than a few hundred thousand (Ravitzky 1996: 60). But, argue Ravitzky and other Israeli experts, their influence has spread among the pious to an extent far exceeding their numbers. At the funeral service for Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum (c. 1887-1979), the author of *Va-Yoel Moshe*, the fundamental text of Judaic anti-Zionism (Teitelbaum 1985), several prominent rabbis, even those who opposed him during his lifetime, declared that the path of the departed was the only true one, and that it was only their weakness that prevented them from following him.

This explains the Zionist leaders' determination to undermine and marginalize religious opposition to Zionism. Important in this sense is the political assassination of Jacob Israel De Haan (1881-1924) by the Zionist militia Haganah. He was the spokesman of the anti-Zionist Agudath Israel, and the Zionists feared that De Haan would be able to set up a rival organization made up of anti-Zionist rabbinical leaders that would develop cooperation with Arab leaders. Such an eventuality struck fear into the Zionists because, in demographic terms, they were then still in the minority in Palestine (Danziger 1983: 443-4).

Historically, the antagonism between Zionism and traditional Judaism should be seen in the context of the interplay of different tendencies that characterized the evolution of the Judaic belief. This kind of religious opposition refuses to vanish in spite of the impressive achievements of Zionism and of the state that embodies it. One of the reasons for this persistence is something both Zionist intellectuals and the rabbis who oppose



them often agree on: Zionism is a negation of Jewish heritage and tradition (Rabkin 2006). Yosef Salmon, an Israeli authority on the history of Zionism, writes about the reactions to the emergence of the new political movement:

It was the Zionist threat that offered the gravest danger, for it sought to rob the traditional community of its very birthright, both in the Diaspora and in Eretz Israel [the Land of Israel], the object of its messianic hopes. Zionism challenged all the aspects of traditional Judaism: in its proposal of a modern, national Jewish identity; in the subordination of traditional society to new life-styles; and in its attitude to the religious concepts of Diaspora and redemption. The Zionist threat reached every Jewish community. It was unrelenting and comprehensive, and therefore it met with uncompromising opposition. (Salmon 1998: 25)

Virulent opposition to Zionism and to the State of Israel has been the hallmark of several Orthodox Jewish movements. They consider Zionism to be a heresy, a denial of fundamental messianic beliefs and a violation of the promise made to God not to acquire the Holy Land by human effort. At the core of their opposition lies the centrality of exile, a universalist religious concept indifferent to geographic location. The alliance of anti-Zionist forces produced, within a few years of the first Zionist congress, several anthologies drawn from a broad range of rabbinical authorities in Eastern Europe (Landau 1900; Steinberg 1902). Among other things, they objected to the evacuation of all normative content from the Jewish identity, and its reduction to a replica of the secular European identity.

Orthodox Jews in Germany were no less determined to reject Zionism than their brethren in Eastern Europe whom they used to call *Ostjuden* and often treated with condescension. Indeed, German Jews pressured their government not to allow the first Zionist congress to be held in their country and it was therefore finally transferred to Basel, Switzerland. Rejection of Jewish nationalism drew its inspiration from influential Judaic authorities. German Rabbi Isaac Breuer (1883-1946), fulminated in the wake of World War I: “Zionism is the most terrible enemy that has ever arisen to the Jewish Nation. The anti-nationalistic Reform engages [the Jewish nation] at least in



an open fight, but Zionism kills the nation and then elevates the corpse to the throne” (Zur 1998: 111).

Reform Jews have also formulated Judaic critiques of Zionism, drawing on their own interpretation of the Torah. Like virtually all the currents of Judaism in the early twentieth century, the Reform movement was firmly opposed to Zionism, which strove to create a new national identity. Prior to the rise of political Zionism in Europe, the program of Reform Judaism adopted in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1885, rejected all forms of Jewish nationalism (Mezvinsky 1989: 315). Reform Jews were thus prepared to refute Herzl’s Zionist theory, which postulated the absolute existence of antisemitism that would justify a state for the Jews. An early critic of Zionism, the Reform Jewish scholar Morris Jastrow (1861-1921) affirmed that “Judaism and Zionism are mutually exclusive”, emphasizing that political Zionism was inspired by the anachronistic return to the tribal stage of Judaism (Jastrow 1919: 33). “Reform Judaism is spiritual, Zionism is political. The outlook of Reform Judaism is the world. The outlook of Zionism is a corner of western Asia,” declared Rabbi David Philipson in 1942 (Brownfeld 1997: 9).

Not only did the vast majority of Jews initially reject Zionism, but the founder of the movement felt quite uneasy about his own Jewishness: “the moment which is considered the beginning of Herzl’s “conversion” to Zionism is also the moment in which he most strongly wanted to occlude the fact that he was Jewish” (Piterberg 2008: 2). This unease of several Zionist leaders could also be seen in the belief of Arthur Ruppin, the father of the Zionist settlement in Palestine, who believed that “the Ashkenazi Jew was closer to the Indo-Germanic races than the Semitic ones” (Piterberg 2008: 84). Ben-Gurion saw Judaism as “the historical misfortune of the Jewish people” (Leibowitz 1995: 144). Hatred of religious Jews, particularly of the *haredim*, the so-called “ultra-Orthodox”, in Israeli society has reached levels unimaginable elsewhere in the world, and it has been suggested that antisemitic prejudice is alive and well in the only state that calls itself Jewish (Efron 1991: 15-22; 88-90).

As the battles for territory were being waged in Palestine in 1948, the prominent German Jewish scholar Martin Buber (1878-1965), who settled in Palestine in the late 1930s, was bitterly disappointed with the path Zionism had taken before his eyes. On this occasion he wrote: “This sort of Zionism



blasphemes the name of Zion; it is nothing more than one of the crude forms of nationalism” (Buber 1948). Jewish intellectuals remain divided in their attitudes to Israel’s policies and practices as well as to its founding ideology, Zionism.

While the Jewish tradition repeatedly cautions Jews against personal or collective pride, it was precisely in these traits that the Zionists sought the kind of respect that they defined in terms of the classic Western criteria for success. Heroic romanticism, in a clean break with Rabbinic Judaism, put down roots in these new Jewish circles in the 1920s-30s, exhibiting traits of the then widely admired fascism. This is why Jewish socialists and communists have denounced Zionism as a betrayal of internationalism and a crass attempt to camouflage ethnic nationalism and promote fascist attitudes. The socialist founders of the State of Israel have come under criticism for using socialist forms of social organization as a temporary expedient to reach their nationalist goals (Sternhell 1998). This would explain the attraction Israel currently exercises on ethnic nationalists, often with a recent antisemitic past, in Europe. Now that old socialist forms have been largely abandoned, this admiration keeps growing, involving a broad range of anti-Islam and anti-immigrant groups. It would be wrong to view Zionism as only a vestige of nineteenth-century nationalism and colonialism: Israel appears as a trendsetter for a number of European politicians espousing ethnic nationalism and convinced of the imminent “clash of civilizations”.

For many Jews, and for most Jewish organizations, loyalty to Israel has replaced allegiance to Judaism. A veteran of Jewish organisations who has taken a critical distance from his institutional past and from “Jewish community McCarthyism” has stated that for many Jewish organisations, “if you do not support the government of Israel, then your Jewishness, and not your political judgment, will be called into question” (Hedges 2002).

The veteran Israeli statesman Abba Eban (1915-2002) used to point out that the main task of Israeli propaganda (he would call it *hasbara*, or explanation/public diplomacy) is to make it clear to the world that there is no difference between antisemitism and anti-Zionism. Consequently, prosecution of critics of Israel as antisemites has been attempted in France and other countries. These measures to silence opponents of Zionism seem to bear fruit at the time of writing, as pro-Israel groups propose to outlaw boycotting and



other non-violent forms of protest against Israel's treatment of the Palestinians (Keefer 2010).

Most non-Arab Israelis are reluctant to admit the injustices done to the indigenous population of Palestine in the course of Zionist colonization of Palestine; they would not attribute the enduring enmity of the displaced Palestinians to grievances about their deportation and dispossession. In spite of consistent efforts by Israeli dissidents (<http://zochrot.org/en>) to inform their compatriots of the expulsions and dispossessions of Palestinians, legislative initiatives threatened to outlaw commemoration of the Nakba and therefore further obliterate this tragedy from the Israelis' collective memory. Rather, "the Arabs" and "the Muslims" are portrayed as irrational haters, religious fanatics or even modern-day Nazis. The current center among Zionist parties in Israel has moved significantly to the right of the Revisionist movement, which used to be condemned as militarist and fascist. Soon after the unilateral declaration of the State of Israel in May 1948, prominent secular Jewish intellectuals, including Hannah Arendt and Albert Einstein, qualified the party currently representing Israel's mainstream (Likud, the heir to Herut) as a fascist party practicing terrorism (New Palestine Party ... 1948). Since then, Likud has shifted to a more exclusive and uncompromising nationalism than that espoused by its founders Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880-1940) and Menahem Begin (1913-1992).

The disappearance of meaningful distinctions between left and right and a shift from a socialist egalitarian economic ethos to a neo-liberal one has been facilitated in Israel by a steady growth of what Israeli observers term as exclusive nationalism (Okon 2010; Burston 2007). "The Arab threat", which has taken the rhetorical shape of "the Muslim threat" in the last two decades, has helped successive Israeli governments to apply these neo-liberal reforms with relative ease. The mass demonstrations in Israel in the summer of 2011 only proved this point by focusing on issues of social justice to the exclusion of "the Arab question".

Western reactions to the events of September 11, 2001 embraced Israel's official narrative about the Muslims' irrational hatred of progress and freedom and hostility to "Judeo-Christian" values. In the meantime, Israel had become a privileged source of expertise and equipment in "the war on terror" conducted by Western nations.



## Conclusion

The Zionist project in the Holy Land has passed the centenary mark. This initially socialist-oriented secular settlement has undergone sacralization, becoming a focal point for right-wing Christian nationalists in many countries of Europe and beyond. Unlike Jews and Muslims in the Holy Land, who actually live with the conflict and know its practical consequences, Christian Zionists relate to the conflict from afar. For them the Holy Land remains a purely spiritual entity. This is why Christian Zionism, together with some adepts of National Judaism, may be the only truly religious obstacle to peace in Israel-Palestine, or, to be more precise, a mighty political obstacle rooted in religious discourse. While Jews constitute an indispensable instrument in the realization of the Restoration, their role remains subordinated to the theological desiderata of the Second Coming of Christ.

If there was a religion that inspired political Zionism, it was Protestantism, rather than Judaism. Jews were introduced to Zionism centuries after the idea was born in Protestant circles in Europe, and the current number of Christian Zionists is estimated at four to five times the total number of Jews in the world. These Christian and European contributions to the emergence of Zionism and the Zionist state must be taken into account in any analysis of the State of Israel and its position in the Middle East.

Christian Protestant Zionism, a precursor to Herzlian Zionism, is a crucial linchpin of unconditional support for Israel. For the evangelical preacher Jerry Falwell, the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 has been the most crucial event in history since the ascension of Jesus to heaven, and “proof that the second coming of Jesus Christ is nigh.... Without a State of Israel in the Holy Land, there cannot be the second coming of Jesus Christ, nor can there be a Last Judgement, nor the End of the World” (Tremblay 2003: 118). This theological position ensures that the identification of the Zionist state with Christian Evangelicals in the United States is complete. In a televised address to the annual meeting of Christians United for Israel in July 2011, Prime Minister Netanyahu said: “When you support Israel, you don’t have to choose between your interests and your values; you get both. ... Our enemies think that we are you, and that you are us. And you know something? They are



absolutely right. (Mozgovaya 2011)”

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