
A Fresh Look at Louis Marshall and Zionism, 1900-1912

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I

The American Jewish community is the largest, the most affluent and influential Jewry in the 2,500-year history of the Diaspora. It is the first to enjoy the benefits of full emancipation since Biblical days.

The story of the colonies' break from English rule is, of course, a familiar one, as is that of the evolution of the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights. These events and documents provided the framework for the free, democratic existence of most residents of the United States. That basic framework was neither complete nor perfect. It needed to be challenged, expanded and shaped, a process requiring much effort and courage. Louis Marshall (1856-1929) played a key role in the process of shaping that framework, especially as it related to the American Jewish community.

Marshall was privileged to begin his public life at the time of a rapidly developing America and a concurrently developing American Jewry. For nearly thirty years, he was to be in the forefront of the battles to protect the social, political and economic rights of the American Jew. No other American Jew became so consistently involved in the most significant issues affecting American Jews and their status than did Louis Marshall. No other Jewish lay leader of the time enjoyed as much top-level political influence in both the executive and legislative branches of state and national government for so long a period of time as did this distinguished personality. No other American Jew was characterized as being

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so eloquent, fearless and honest a spokesman for American Jewry.¹

Louis Marshall had the good fortune to be born and educated in America before massive immigration began in 1881. He became the leading spokesman of the American Jewish elite, mostly upperclass Jews of German background. As a highly successful constitutional lawyer, first in Syracuse, New York and later in New York City, he began to demonstrate enormous leadership qualities.

Part of Marshall's greatness is reflected in the breadth of his interest, in Jewish as well as non-Jewish causes. His time and efforts were not limited solely to creating and building a first-rate institution for Jewish delinquents in New York City, or defending the honor of the East Side immigrant community against unfair accusations of criminality, or, as a leader of the American Jewish Committee, fighting to keep the gates of immigration open to Eastern European Jews, or battling Czarist Russia's discrimination against American Jewish citizens. He also helped establish a fine rabbinic seminary, aided in the creation of one of the most effective Jewish defense organizations, and worked hard for unification of a chaotic New York Jewish community. At the same time he fought for the creation of the nation's first forestry science college, broke the legal barriers against Blacks in primary elections, and defended duly elected Socialist legislators who had been barred from taking office. He dictated an apology signed by Henry Ford, the leading anti-Semite of the 1920's, and for many years acted as a one-man police force, personally refuting statements of newspapers, judges, and public officials all over the country which insulted the Jewish immigrant or questioned the American Jew's social, political and economic rights. He possessed a brilliant mind and a dedication to high purpose, and his forceful personality was to leave its mark on every issue with which he dealt. This was true with regard to Louis Marshall's early attitudes toward Zionism and the Zionist movement in America.

¹ For works dealing with the life of Louis Marshall see Charles Reznikoff, *Louis Marshall: Champion of Liberty* (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1957); Morton Rosenstock, *Louis Marshall, Defender of Jewish Rights* (Detroit, 1965); Horace Stern, *Louis Marshall. An Appreciation* (Philadelphia, 1930); and Jerome C. Rosenthal, "The Early Public Life of Louis Marshall: 1900-1912 - A Vital Period in American Jewish History" (unpublished M. A. thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1978).

II

The wealthy and influential German Jews of early 20th-century America, the cream of the so-called "our crowd" circle, have been frequently and harshly berated for their supposed anti-Zionist position.² This blanket criticism of Jewish leaders who did so much for the American Jewish community of their time includes Louis Marshall.

Most of Marshall's close acquaintances and working associates within the American Jewish Committee, the leading American Jewish defense organization of its time, were admittedly cool toward political Zionism, if not overtly anti-Zionists. The exceptions, like Rabbis Max Heller and Judah Magnes, were few and far between. Marshall, unlike others of his rank, never harbored any bitterness toward the fledgling Zionist movement which was just beginning to achieve a measure of success in the early twentieth century. Despite the serious doubts he had about the success of the movement, Marshall believed that Palestine could serve as a spiritual center of world Jewry.³

It was Marshall, in fact, more than any other contemporary American Jewish leader who eloquently voiced this sympathy for the early Zionist efforts in the first decade of the twentieth century. He frequently extolled the Jewish colonization work and reclamation projects in Palestine. In a letter to Nathan Straus he wrote:

As you know, I am not a Zionist, certainly not a Nationalist. I am a Jew from conviction and sentiment, one who takes pride in the literature, the history, the traditions, and the spiritual and intellectual contributions which Judaism has made to the world and as I grow older, the feelings of love and reverence for the cradle of our race increase in intensity. . . . It becomes the bounden duty of those of our people who have been blessed by Providence with worldly possessions, and who are at the same time imbued with the sentiments of love and loyalty for Judaism and its institutions, to concentrate their efforts toward development of that land, which, after all, should rouse the most tender feelings in the heart of every Jew.⁴

² A number of older works dealing with the American Jewish experience reflect this point of view.

³ Melvin I. Urofsky, *American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust*, N.Y., 1975, p. 98.

⁴ Naomi W. Cohen, *Not Free to Desist*, 1972, Philadelphia, pp. 106-7.

Unfortunately, the quality of Zionist leadership before 1914 was such that Marshall and others of his opinion simply dismissed it as unworthy of support. Marshall assessed the situation in the following manner: "If the (Zionist) leader knows less than I do, how can I follow him?"⁵

III

Although Marshall was fully aware of the political movement to establish Palestine as a homeland for Jews, he had no sympathy with it early in the first decade of this century. Ever besieged by all manner of Jewish groups to address them, he usually refused, with the exception of educational lectures to Jewish Theological Seminary classes and Temple Emanu-El auxiliaries. When asked to address a Zionist group in 1901, he declined, saying that he could not conscientiously avail himself of the invitation.

While I sympathize heartily with every movement which tends to ameliorate the condition of our co-religionists, I have been unable to convince myself that the nationalistic movement represented by the Zionists possesses any element of practicality... and much as I have been impressed by the enthusiasm of Herzl, Nordau and Zangwill in respect to the Palestine restoration, I can view it merely in the light of a poet's dream.⁶

It is important to note Marshall's sincere concern for Jews all over the world including Palestine, and that it was the political movement for which he had no concern. In 1904 he contributed \$25 for the fund for the children of Theodor Herzl when an appeal was made by the Federation of American Zionists, because "he admired Herzl."⁷

When his friend, the registrar of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Adolphus S. Solomons, asked for Marshall's help in a movement by the Zionists to move Jews out of Russia to some colony on another continent due to the terrible pogroms, he refused to help.

⁵ Yonathan Shapiro, *Leadership of the American Zionist Organization, 1897-1930*, Urbana, 1971, p. 92.

⁶ Louis Marshall to Michael Leon, 12/30/01, American Jewish Archives, Marshall Papers (AJA-MP).

⁷ Louis Marshall to Federation of American Zionists, 8/29/04, AJA-MP.

The people of Russia will have to work out their own salvation, as other people have done. A colonial scheme of the character proposed has never succeeded since the world began. You cannot transfer a large body of people from one country to another and make anything else of them than a dependent class.⁸

He objected to the organized moving of a large group en masse as against the type of immigration experienced in the United States which he supported wholeheartedly.

When his friend Rabbi Max Heller of New Orleans became a staunch Zionist, Marshall said he just did not believe that the Russian Jews could solve their problems through Zionism. Instead, he believed that “eventually Russia will have a free government and Jews there will be able to enjoy rights and privileges as they do elsewhere.”⁹

Another part of Marshall’s greatness lay in his ability to change his mind when convinced of the correctness of a position. In 1908 he was so enthusiastic about a new book on Zionism written in German (which he knew fluently) by Dr. Max Stolp, called *Das Judentum am Scheidewege*, that he sent it to Jacob H. Schiff to read. He called it the best and most convincing presentation of the Zionist cause he had seen.

It has certainly given me new ideas and has led me to regard the cause which it advocates with better understanding and with much more sympathy than I have heretofore given it.¹⁰

With this new attitude, he was persuaded by Dr. Solomon Schechter of the Jewish Theological Seminary to act as a trustee of the Technicum (later changed to Technion) in Palestine. He did so with some misgivings because he believed that the money spent here (i.e., New York City) would do more good.¹¹

He was also concerned with assuming responsibility for a work

being carried on 5,000 miles away by people of whom I know but little or nothing. However, I can salve my conscience by the thought that if I am making a mistake, I am doing so in good company and with good motives.

⁸ Louis Marshall to A. S. Solomons, 10/21/05, AJA-MP.

⁹ Louis Marshall to Max Heller, 12/20/05, AJA-MP.

¹⁰ Louis Marshall to Jacob H. Schiff, 10/2/08, AJA-MP.

¹¹ Louis Marshall to Dr. Solomon Schechter, 12/28/08, AJA-MP.

In 1909 he gave a \$100 contribution to the American School for Oriental Research in Palestine recommended by Professor Richard Gottheil of Columbia University.¹²

He helped to raise money for the technical school at Haifa and wrote letters to many wealthy Jews to obtain financial support. In this process he assured Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck and Co., that "the institute is not Zionistic. In the words of Mr. Schiff, it is wedded to no ism save Judaism."¹³

On this understanding Schiff contributed \$100,000, and Dr. Schechter, Dr. Cyrus Adler, Mortimer L. Schiff all became members of the American Board of Directors with Marshall.

One of Marshall's largest undertakings in Palestine was the Jewish Agricultural Experiment Station. He became interested through a young agricultural scientist named Aaron Aaronsohn, who had discovered how to grow a prototype of wheat, barley, rye and oats. World-renowned German botanists and the United States Department of Agriculture had praised Aaronsohn's discovery. As to the purpose, the Station would

develop the commercial wheat of the world, which was a degenerate plant, to its pristine strength, by means of cross fertilization with the primitive wheat. The great advantage of this will be that the primitive wheat flourishes in arid regions and that the kernel is larger and possesses better nutritive qualities than the wheat of today. If the experiments carry out only a small fraction of what is anticipated, they will do much toward solving the difficulties of agriculture in the arid regions of the world.¹⁴

The plan sought to create an experimental agricultural station to test for five years the growing potentials in the arid Palestinian soil. The original cost was to be \$20,000 which Schiff and Rosenwald would cover. Marshall drew up all the incorporation papers with a careful eye to the limited non-Zionist purposes. He personally spent a great deal of time and energy not only putting the concept into a viable entity legally but also undertook to raise the operating funds needed for the five years, by soliciting among his

¹² Louis Marshall to Professor Joseph Jacobs, 6/11/09, AJA-MP.

¹³ Louis Marshall to Julius Rosenwald, 2/2/09, AJA-MP.

¹⁴ Louis Marshall to Jesse Straus, 3/8/10, AJA-MP.

well-to-do coterie.¹⁵ He wrote many letters of introduction to important people for Aaronsohn to make his own pitch.¹⁶

There were complications from the start. He had to reassure Jacob Schiff that

there was no possibility of having our movement construed as Zionistic in its tendency. The undertaking is declared to be exclusively on a scientific and educational basis, without a religious, national or political tendency of any kind.¹⁷

Most of his coterie were of like mind in not wishing to be associated with a “Zionistic” cause.

The need for land for the station brought into sharp focus the emotional and intellectual conflicts in the situation. Marshall understood that a direct purchase of land would easily be misconstrued as a Zionist act. He suggested accepting a grant of land from one of the Zionist land owning groups as more palatable. He told Aaronsohn that Schiff was dead set against buying the needed land from the Zionist National Fund on the ground that “he does not want to be a tail to the Zionistic kite.”¹⁸

But he also told him that he personally had no objection to being assisted by whatever source was available, so long as “we are not labeled as a Zionistic organization.”

Marshall had to keep Schiff’s goodwill but never hesitated to set forth his opinions.

As you know, I am a non-Zionist but not an anti-Zionist. I object fully as much as you do to being publicly connected with a Zionistic undertaking. Yet I can see no objection to the acceptance of financial aid from a Zionist or Zionistic organization.¹⁹

His mood was one of frustration because he became involved in the Experimental Station to a much greater extent than he first anticipated. He had the chores of writing letters to solicit funds, letters of introduction and all the legal work too.

¹⁵ Louis Marshall to Adolph Lewisohn, 11/20/09, AJA-MP.

¹⁶ Louis Marshall to Daniel Guggenheim, 11/24/09, AJA-MP.

¹⁷ Louis Marshall to Jacob H. Schiff, 3/22/10, AJA-MP.

¹⁸ Louis Marshall to A. Aaronsohn, 3/26/10, AJA-MP.

¹⁹ Louis Marshall to Jacob H. Schiff, 3/26/10, AJA-MP. See also Marshall’s article in the *American Hebrew* of 9/20/07 in which he expressed warm sympathy and admiration for the Zionist movement while clearly excluding himself from the cause.

My past experience in these matters has been that not only the labor but also the expense of such organization has fallen upon me individually. . . . I feel rather annoyed at the idea that everybody seems to cast his burdens upon me and that my good nature is presumed upon in this as in other matters. As it is, I am overwhelmed with work; I have not a moment of leisure time. . . .²⁰

It was the same process all over again as he had experienced with creating the Jewish Protectory, reorganizing the Jewish Theological Seminary and launching the American Jewish Committee. Everyone seemed to know that Louis Marshall was not only bright and able but a workhorse too.

Henrietta Szold helped with the paper work on the Station and the list of contributors for the operating fund showed Marshall at \$300, Rosenwald and Schiff at \$2000 each, Paul Warburg at \$1000 and Isaac Seligman at \$1000, among others.²¹

Marshall had great hopes for the Station and told his friend Dr. Cyrus Adler, "If I had the money I would be glad to finance the entire enterprise but inasmuch as I have not, I must depend upon the moods and humors of the millionaires."²² The Experimental Station had very difficult times, and during World War I the Turks destroyed it and all of Dr. Aaronsohn's efforts came to naught. Later on, Dr. Aaronsohn was killed in an airplane crash.²³

He was interested enough in Zionism in 1911 to have read the proceedings of the Zionist convention but told his young Zionist brother-in-law, Rabbi Magnes, that he "was not impressed by anything it said or did."²⁴

Yet there was a firmness in his opposition to the idea advanced by German Jews who also supported the Technicum in Haifa, that German should be the language of the school. He and the American Jews on the Board were unanimously for the use of Hebrew as well as Arabic in the school, but Hebrew was to "receive the place of honor in the institution."²⁵

²⁰ Louis Marshall to A. Aaronsohn, 1/13/10, AJA-MP.

²¹ Louis Marshall to Henrietta Szold, 3/3/10, AJA-MP.

²² Louis Marshall to Cyrus Adler, 1/18/10, AJA-MP.

²³ Louis Marshall Address to University of State of New York at Albany, 10/21/21, AJA-MP.

²⁴ Louis Marshall to J. L. Magnes, 7/29/11, AJA-MP.

²⁵ Louis Marshall to Abraham Goldberg, 11/1/13, AJA-MP.

Furthermore, Marshall seemed to be catching some of the new spirit of the Zionists who were engaged in the creation of new colonies in Palestine and were financed by Baron de Rothschild. He portrayed this in a letter to a friend and fellow Jewish communal leader when he said,

Since Baron de Rothschild undertook the work of establishing Jewish colonies in Palestine, of developing upon its sacred soil agricultural and industrial activities, of again turning the eyes of the Jews to the possibilities of reestablishing it as the home of the victims of oppression in other lands, a new impetus has been given to our people, a new type of men has arisen, the Maccabean spirit has revived. . . .

He also showed sympathy for the practical needs of developing Palestine: "Lands must be acquired to give scope for the operations of those who are now attracted to Palestine."²⁶

Marshall, being a practical person, envisioned Palestine as the haven for the hundreds of thousands of Eastern European Jews yet to leave their old world homes. He foresaw the problem of America's gates closing on them.

Until now we have been enabled to keep open the doors of opportunity, but the time has come when I greatly fear that restrictive immigration laws will be passed, with the result that, to a considerable extent, the storm-tossed children of Russia and Rumanian Ghettos will be unable to receive admittance here. Hence it becomes the bounden duty of those of our people who have been blessed by Providence with worldly possessions, and who are at the same time imbued with the sentiments of love and loyalty for Judaism and its institutions, to concentrate their efforts toward the development of that land. . . I am not a mere dreamer when I express the conviction that it is possible that large tracts of land may be acquired in Palestine for the development of agriculture and the establishment of extensive industries and for the creation of a permanent home for those of us who have had no secure abiding place.²⁷

It appears that Louis Marshall was more of a Zionist than he realized, at least in so far as the physical development of the land was concerned and its usefulness as a haven for the Eastern European Jews still to come out of Europe. Yet he certainly would not have supported the Zionist concept which denied a meaningful Jewish survival in the

²⁶ Louis Marshall to Nathan Straus, 1/20/14, AJA-MP.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Diaspora. Nor is it probable that he would have favored emigration to Palestine for American Jewry. Since those opening years of the 20th-century, Marshall's views about a meaningful Jewish existence in the Diaspora and the question of massive American immigration to Palestine have come to be valid points in the eyes of American Zionists today.