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# The Zionist Influence on American Jewish Life

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One can point to three formative elements in the growth of the American Jewish community: tradition and Jewish continuity; local American factors; and, lastly, Zionism. It is widely acknowledged that the State of Israel and what is often called “pro-Israelism” have affected American Jewish life profoundly. This article, however, has a more limited focus: Zionism’s influence during the pre-state period, roughly from the founding of the Zionist Organization of America (then the Federation of American Zionists) in 1898, to 1948. I will address myself to two basic questions: How profound was the movement’s direct impact, and in what areas of Jewish life was it felt?<sup>1</sup>

In asking about Zionism in the American context, we must first confront a certain norm in Zionist historiography, which tends to define the American movement mainly in relation to European Zionism: more concretely, by phrasing the comparison negatively. Writers of this tendency place great emphasis on American Zionism’s “non-negation of the Diaspora”—undeniably a basic characteristic of American Zionism; but one can hardly explain a historical movement solely by emphasizing what it was not or is not.<sup>2</sup> I will try, instead, to define my question positively and, I trust, productively; i.e., what was it in the world view of American Zionism that might have enabled it to influence American Jewish life?

As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, the American Zionist movement promoted the notion of America as a healthy amalgam of different cultures and ethnicities. Zionist thinkers, secular and religious alike, fostered the hope that the Jewish community would flourish within America’s federal political framework and pluralistic society.<sup>3</sup>

A second and related concept shared by the Zionists that provided a potential basis for a significant leadership role in the community was

democracy: American Zionists fervently believed that the democratization of American Jewish organizational life would open the community to greater Zionist influence, given the movement's growing popular base.

American Zionism functioned within a community that was not so much anti-Zionist as non-Zionist. To varying degrees American non-Zionists supported efforts for the settlement of Palestine and demonstrated solidarity with the world's oppressed Jewries. Indeed, the fact that many American Jews contributed to the strengthening of the Jewish homeland and the defense of overseas Jewries created opportunities for Zionist involvement and Zionist influence.

This combination of circumstances—the nature of American Zionism and the character of U.S. Jewry—made Zionism a constructive factor in the life of American Jewry. Generally speaking, American Zionism did not face a hostile community that had to be “conquered,” as had often been the case in Europe. Paradoxically, Zionism itself was part of the very community that it hoped to “convert.”

At the same time, there were some natural checks on Zionist involvement in communal affairs. American Zionism belonged to a world movement aspiring to a sweeping national revival and to Jewish sovereignty in an independent state; as such it could not expect to hold a central, or perhaps even valid, place within the structure of local communities. Moreover, as a constituent member of a world movement that “negated” life in the Diaspora, American Zionism was hardly suited to systematic collective efforts aimed at developing local communities. Zionists qua Zionists generally focused their efforts on specific, limited projects and sought to affect only certain aspects of communal life: and they carried out these efforts, for the most part, as individuals and only rarely as a movement.

### *Institutional Structures and Communal Organization*

Zionism had a share in the forging of American Jewish communal structures and institutions. Prominent Zionists—Judah Magnes, Mordecai Kaplan, and Samson Benderly among them—participated in the great experiment of organizing New York Jewry under one umbrella body, the *Kehillah*. While the *Kehillah* proved a passing phenomenon (1908–1922), it left behind a vital legacy, especially in the realm of Jewish education.

Mordecai Kaplan, the outstanding Religious Zionist thinker of the period, held a vision of an all-encompassing, organic Jewish community. If Reconstructionism, as a movement, did not take this notion very far, Kaplan's ideas on regenerating Jewish civilization in America left an enduring stamp. Today's Jewish community centers, which serve increasingly as focal points for American Jewish identification with the State of Israel and its culture, are a clear example of his legacy.<sup>4</sup>

At two historic junctures the American Zionist movement competed with other elements in the community over the organization and control of American Jewry: during World War I, a period of tremendous Jewish suffering abroad and of great Zionist diplomatic achievements; and in the 1940s, with the swelling of Zionist ranks in the face of Nazism. At those particular moments in time, the movement's clear goals were the protection of Jewish populations abroad and the development of the Land of Israel as a recognized, secure national home for a persecuted people. But in order to advance these goals, the movement pressed for the democratization of the structure of the American Jewish community, then dominated by non-Zionist philanthropists. Zionists worked toward the creation of a broad democratic framework, and struggled specifically for general elections within the Jewish community. In this way, American Zionists contributed to the founding of the American Jewish Congress during the First World War and, during the Second World War, to the establishment of the American Jewish Conference (1943 - 1949).

These developments, with all the nationalism and democratic zeal that they entailed, did not directly change the structure of local American Jewish communities. As a voluntary community within a free and pluralistic society, American Jewry continued to be led, primarily, by wealthy individuals willing to give of their time, talent, and money for communal affairs.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, Zionist efforts did affect processes that ultimately led to more open and democratic elections; to the formation of new elites that were more representative and responsive to their constituencies; to a decentralization process that provided more scope for authentic local influence; and to the emergence of a critical American Jewish press and public increasingly sensitive to issues of democratic procedure.<sup>6</sup>

American Zionism contributed more to the community, however, than stamping it with one or another organizational style. Through

these struggles, the movement enhanced the intellectual level and political awareness of Jewish public discourse. Beyond that, by focusing on social and political issues, and by promoting a democratic and egalitarian ambience, Zionism contributed to the advancement of East European Jews in America and to their integration within the more established Jewish community.

### *Fund-Raising and Aid to Palestine*

Zionism also played a role in the creation of funds and appeals to foster Jewish settlement in Palestine and to aid Jews in distress, and helped make these instruments central to American Jewish institutional life. As already mentioned, Zionism did not hold a monopoly on concern about persecution and support for Jewish settlers in Palestine; but as a nationalist movement devoted to Jewish solidarity and the establishment of the Land of Israel as the national home, Zionism did much to institutionalize the provision of economic aid. Zionists were a prominent element in the community's initial mobilization during World War I; as early as August 1914 the Zionists set up the Palestine Relief Fund. At about the same time, Socialist Zionists urged the Jewish labor movement to establish the People's Relief Committee. If, in the course of World War I, Zionist and other mass organizations merged with the fiscal network of the Jewish elite, the Zionist movement, historically speaking, must be credited with an incessant, dynamic, and effective pioneering effort. When, finally, the American Joint Distribution Committee (known as the "Joint") arose under the leadership of the Jewish philanthropists as the primary body dealing with oppressed Jewries worldwide, it absorbed all relevant major groups active within the Jewish population.<sup>7</sup>

In 1924 the Histadrut Campaign (the *Geverkshafte*n) was initiated to support the Histadrut (General Federation of Jewish Workers in Palestine), especially in three areas: absorption of immigrants to Palestine; forging links between the Histadrut and labor and liberal circles in North America; and advancing the Zionist effort in general. The Histadrut Campaign became a prominent fixture in the community. A very important period in the history of this fund and American Zionism was the year of 1945, when the AFL-CIO organized to provide massive help to the Histadrut and the Zionist enterprise generally.

This achievement did much to raise the prestige of the Histadrut Campaign.<sup>8</sup>

The United Palestine Appeal came into being in 1925, incorporating all the Zionist funds in the United States. The first leaders of the new Zionist fund were Emanuel Neumann and Stephen Wise; from 1938 to 1943 the president was Abba Hillel Silver. The United Jewish Appeal (UJA) was founded toward the close of 1938, in the wake of the *Kristallnacht*. Encompassing primarily the Zionist fund and the Joint, the UJA provided help to the Jewish community of Palestine, and especially (later) to the fledgling state, thereby becoming a central factor in the federations' activities and in the life of the American Jewish community.<sup>9</sup>

### *Religious Life*

Ostensibly, Zionist influence on the community's religious life was very limited, at least before 1948. It was primarily the secular Jewish community that Zionism penetrated, providing meaning and challenge to Jewish circles for whom the synagogue was not a central focus.

One cannot conclude from this that Zionism had no effect on the religious life of American Jews. We must remember that American Zionism was never antireligious. Even America's Labor Zionist movement—at least its major component organizations—was not antireligious; it was more nonreligious or areligious. Many of America's Zionist activists and leaders were associated in one way or another with religious life; only a small proportion of them were dyed-in-the-wool secularists. More than providing an alternative to religion, Zionism in America often served as its complement, and variously blended in with existing religious currents.

The involvement of Zionists in the American Orthodox camp prevented significant segments of that community from falling into the category of "separatist Orthodoxy" (known in nineteenth-century Germany as *Trennungsorthodoxie*). Their Zionist sympathies placed most Orthodox Jews within the broad national framework, that of *Klal Yisrael* (Jewish peoplehood), and thus led a sizable portion of the Orthodox community to recognize the legitimacy of other expressions of Judaism in the United States, or at least to cooperate with them.<sup>10</sup>

As is known, Conservative Judaism was a stronghold of American Zionism. Both laymen and professionals were devoted to the cause; the Conservative rabbinate in particular provided much of the leadership for General Zionism. (In fact, in the 1940s the ZOA drew up plans to make use of synagogue organizations to bolster Zionist strength.) But Conservative Jewry's connection with the Zionist cause can be seen in a different light; perhaps it was partially due to its attachment to Zionistically inclined cultural traditions that the Conservative movement became central to the religious life of American Jewry. Many East European Jews had passed through intensive acculturation in the period between the two world wars and were looking for a non-Orthodox religious stream that would meet their need to be counted in *Klal Yisrael* and give voice to their love of Jewish tradition and their connection with the Land of Israel. The Conservative movement "filled the bill" and so became the address for a broad swath of American Jewry—especially between 1917 and 1948.<sup>11</sup>

During the last sixty-odd years, largely due to the impact of Nazism, the Holocaust, and the birth of Israel, the Reform movement has undergone a clear process of Zionization. In the context of this study we can single out one facet of the process—Zionism's contribution to the rooting of the Reform movement within the community. Instead of turning into a narrowly defined denomination, Reform Judaism, in large measure under the impact of Zionism, transcended its earlier sociological and ideological limitations and so retained its place as a major religious movement (according to recent indications, probably the largest group today) in American Jewry. Through Zionism, Reform Judaism discovered what it had always sought—a modern, positive, and relevant content; and significantly, Zionism endowed the Reform notion of mission with new meaning.<sup>12</sup>

### *Jewish Education*

American Zionism had a strong tendency to interpret Zionism as the natural outgrowth of Judaism; a new link, to be sure, but a link bound organically to Jewish history and civilization through the ages. This emphasis on continuity enabled American Zionism to blend into and contribute to the educational efforts of American Jewry. (European Zionism, which purported to redeem Jews from an allegedly docile

and submissive exilic tradition, tended to skip over Jewish historical continuity and to concentrate enthusiastically on ancient periods of political independence. David Ben-Gurion's passion for the First Commonwealth is a case in point.)

As I have already indicated, American Zionism did not emerge and function along the lines of Europe's *Gegenwartsarbeit*; which is to say, it was not a movement that aimed to contribute, collectively, to a fresh start for the entire Jewish people in the Land of Israel and, for the time being, in the Diaspora as well. In consequence, American Zionists took interest in, and contributed effectively to, the growth of Jewish education in the United States—but essentially as individuals and groups that did not act in the name of the Zionist Organization. From the start of the mass migration and at least into the 1920s, Zionists were active in a variety of educational enterprises within the communal framework—a history I do not intend to detail here. It is important only to note that part of this activity coalesced with, and even laid firm foundations for, Jewish education in America. Zionists and Zionist supporters were among those who set up the educational apparatus of the New York *Kehillah*, a system that ultimately helped to modernize and raise the level of Jewish education in the United States. They brought in a new curriculum and created what was to become the dominant pattern of education in the community schools and in the afternoon Hebrew schools of the more modern type.<sup>13</sup>

Zionists contributed to the establishment of “modernized heders” which in turn gave rise to the new “Talmud Torahs.” Many of the teachers, possibly the backbone of the professionals, were Zionists. Religious Zionists led the modern yeshivas. Meir Bar-Ilan (Berlin), president of the U.S. Mizrahi movement from 1916 to 1926, also served as president of the Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, a nucleus of what was to become Yeshiva University.

Of all the Zionist organizations, Hadassah is worthy of special mention. Here we discuss a Zionist organization that not only “influenced the community,” but also, due to its ideology, size, mass membership, and rootedness on the American Jewish scene, itself comprised a large component of the community. Hadassah initiated and developed broad educational publications that were deeply Jewish in character, presenting Zionism as the logical extension (or nearly so) of Jewish history. Some of Hadassah's educational projects were under-

taken jointly with such non-Zionist organizations as B'nai B'rith and Hillel.<sup>14</sup>

American Zionists made efforts to revive Hebrew in the United States. There were some small beginnings in the period of mass immigration, usually without much success. (A tragic figure of this period was Naftali Hertz Imber, the Hebrew poet and composer of *Hatikvah*, who died with paltry recognition and in poverty in New York.) In 1921 the daily *Hadoar* was founded, becoming a weekly one year later (as it has remained to this day). The readership was, and remains, minuscule. The major body for the dissemination of Hebrew in the United States is the Histadrut Ivrit, a body supported by the Zionist movement.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps of greater interest than the valiant effort to revive Hebrew in America was Zionist sympathy for Yiddish. At a time when in Europe, generally speaking, Zionists held Yiddish to be Hebrew's sworn rival, it was often considered Hebrew's natural sister in America. Again, this phenomenon derives from the perception of Zionism as a continuation of Judaism, together with the basic openness of the American Zionists to cultural incorporation in the local community. The Zionist labor movement in America promoted Yiddish, in no small measure, in its enterprises.<sup>16</sup> Hayim Greenberg, the outstanding American Socialist Zionist and head of the Education Department of the World Zionist Organization, delivered a dramatic speech at the first Zionist congress to meet in an independent Israel—in Yiddish!

In the final analysis, neither Yiddish nor Hebrew struck deep roots in America, even in the most dedicated Zionist circles. On the other hand, one can note that Zionism lent great vitality to the Jewish English press in the United States. Here we refer not only to the movement's own press but also to a broad influence on communal Jewish newspapers and journals, even including the religious press. At different times and in differing degrees Zionism had a profound influence on the *Menorah Journal*, the *American Hebrew*, *Commentary*, and certainly on such organs as the *Reconstructionist* and *Opinion*.

### *Intercommunal Relations*

The Zionist influence on the life of the Jewish community was especially pronounced in the sphere of intercommunal relations. It is inter-

esting that in this realm, too, the uniqueness of American Zionism stands out in comparison with European Zionism.

American Zionists struggled openly and vigorously against anti-Semitism within the United States and outside it. There is a vast, and perhaps fundamental, difference between their stance and that of the German Zionists, who invested very little energy in the struggle against Nazism. It is difficult, perhaps, to judge Germany's Zionists, but relatively easy to understand them. For them, Germany was beyond redemption and the major solution to their situation was radical, and classically Zionist—reconstituting Palestine as a national home.<sup>17</sup> However, the essential difference between the two historical movements was the American Jewish perception that "America is different." Certainly American Zionists *were* different. They regarded their land of domicile as their home; and to the degree that they encountered discrimination or worse, they were optimistic that through struggle and public education, anti-Semitism could be eradicated or at least mitigated.

The outstanding proponent of this stance was Stephen S. Wise. Under Wise's leadership, the (second) American Jewish Congress and the World Jewish Congress struggled forcefully against Nazism and fascism in Europe and in the United States.<sup>18</sup>

Essentially, Wise adopted the style of the Zionist movement from the start, leading an open, broadly based, democratic campaign. Elitist circles in the community were appalled by this struggle; only with great trepidation, and very slowly, were they brought into the public fight against anti-Semitism. The Zionist camp, conversely, educated the Jews of America to guard their interests proudly, bravely, and openly—in the American political arena as well. It was Abba Hillel Silver who, in the 1940 presidential elections, decided to throw his support to the Republican Party, intending chiefly that the contenders for the presidency (and for other posts as well) ought to compete for Jewish trust in them, ought to prove to the Jewish public that they were sufficiently sensitive to the needs and aspirations of American Jewry. Silver's bold course was of historic significance; and his line was clear: American Jews should stand tall and forge an independent political strategy—a notion that today seems self-evident, and is thoroughly acceptable within American society and politics.<sup>19</sup>

American Zionism, then, played no small role in forging the character of the American Jewish community. But, one may ask, was this not accomplished at the price of giving up its Zionist essence? At times one encounters generalizations, especially as regards the period of the establishment of the state, to the effect that American Zionism conquered the community, but was conquered by it as well. However, as I have already noted, this kind of phraseology and reasoning is too European to fit the circumstances of the American case. Ideological confrontations in America, to the degree that they took place, were generally low-keyed. It is more correct, perhaps, to state that American Zionism influenced the community and at the same time was influenced by it. Of course, the very fact of this mutual influence shows that American Zionism, more or less from the start, differed from the European brand. We have examined this difference not particularly as a “deficiency” (from the vantage point of classical European Zionism) but in its implications for the life of the American community. Hence, it is not a dramatic struggle to “conquer” the community that we find in America, and by the same token there was no question of “being conquered” by it.<sup>20</sup>

We must remember also that American society and politics—the framework in which all the interaction between Zionism and local community took place—were too stable to allow for such European-style “dramas”: polarization was prevented and confrontations were smoothed away. Internal Jewish struggles took place, more or less, according to the American rules of the game. There were differences of opinion and conflicts; but there was some sort of consensus in the background, elusive as it might have been; there were opposing camps with gaps between them, but generally there was openness and a readiness to build bridges.

The nature of American Zionism, the character of U.S. Jewry, and the general American milieu—all combined to realize Zionism’s potential, or to be more precise, part of that potential, as a fruitful element in the life of American Jewry. While the Zionist movement, as a movement, stood on the fringe of the community, it did have a marked influence on Jewish life in America. And more assuredly, individual Zionists, more than Zionism as a movement, contributed much to

their local communities as well as to the Jewish community at large. The influence of the movement and its members found expression in many and varied ways, directly and indirectly. The movement's impact was felt in the change of existing social structures and in independent creative efforts; it expressed itself at times in vigorous and aggressive confrontations; but also—and this was far more characteristic—in alliances and in a process of meshing interests within the communal framework.

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### Notes

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1. Abraham G. Duker's *The Impact of Zionism on American Jewry* (New York, 1958) has helped me structure this article. My thanks go, as well, to Professor Emeritus Ben Halpern of Brandeis University, who read the manuscript and offered valuable advice.

2. Cf. Evyatar Friesel, *The Zionist Movement in the United States, 1897—1914* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1970), pp. 186—191.

3. For a detailed discussion of the theme of this section, see my "Aspects of the Zionist Movement's Role in the Communal Life of American Jewry (1899—1948)," *American Jewish History* 75, no. 2 (December 1985): 149—158. While the above-mentioned article elaborates on the Zionist movement's attitude toward the Jewish community, the present study explores Zionism's impact on the American Jewish setting.

4. Arthur A. Goren, *New York Jews and the Quest for Community: The Kehillah Experiment, 1908—1922* (New York, 1970), pp. 235—244; Charles S. Levy, "Jewish Communal Service," in Oscar I. Janowsky, ed., *The American Jew: A Reappraisal* (Philadelphia, 1967), pp. 262—268.

5. Isaac Neustadt-Noy, "The Unending Task: Efforts to Unite American Jewry from the American Jewish Congress to the American Jewish Conference" (Ph. D. diss., Brandeis University, 1967), esp. chaps. 2, 6; Daniel J. Elazar, *Community and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry* (Philadelphia, 1980), chap. 8.

6. Cf. Ben Halpern, "What Is American Jewry?" *Forum*, no. 26 (1977), pp. 97—104; Daniel J. Elazar, "What Indeed Is American Jewry?" *ibid.*, nos. 28—29 (Winter 1978), pp. 147—159.

7. Goren, *New York Jews*, pp. 214 ff.; Melvin I. Urofsky, *American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust* (New York, 1976), pp. 156—159.

8. Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in U.S.A., 1914—1952* (New York, 1969), pp. 409—412.

9. Ernest Stock, *Partners and Pursestrings: A History of the United Israel Appeal* (Lanham, Md., 1987), pp. 42 ff.

10. See esp. the discussion of modern Orthodoxy in Charles Liebman's "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life," *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. 66 (1965), pp. 48-67.

11. Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism: An American Religious Movement* (New York, 1972), pp. 192, 219-221.

12. Michael A. Meyer, "American Reform Judaism and Zionism: Early Efforts at Ideological Rapprochements," *Zionism* [Hebrew], 9 (1984): 95-110; Allon Gal, "The Mission Motif in American Zionism, 1898-1948," *American Jewish History* 75, no. 4 (June 1986): 378-382.

13. Goren, *New York Jews*, chaps. 5 and 6.

14. An example of Hadassah's educational activity within the community and the perception of Zionism as an organic outgrowth of Jewish history is Leo W. Schwarz, ed., *Great Ages and Ideas of the Jewish People* (New York, 1956), initiated and sponsored by the Women's Zionist Organization of America.

15. Abraham S. Halkin, "Hebrew in Jewish Culture," in Oscar I. Janowsky, ed., *The American Jew: A Composite Portrait* (New York, 1942), pp. 122-133.

16. Cf. Shulamith Nardi, "Yiddish as Catalyst in American Zionism," in Geoffrey Wigoder, ed., *Contemporary Jewry: Studies in Honor of Moshe Davis* (Jerusalem, 1984), pp. 79-83; for Labor Zionism see, e.g., Jacob Katzman, *Commitment: The Labor Zionist Life-Style in America* (New York, 1975), pp. 102-105.

17. Jehuda Reinharz, "The Zionist Response to Antisemitism in Germany," in *Publications of the Leo Baeck Institute* 30 (1985): 105-140; see also Evyatar Friesel, "Criteria and Conception in the Historiography of German and American Zionism," *Zionism*, no. 2 (Autumn 1980), pp. 292-293.

18. Melvin I. Urofsky, *A Voice That Spoke for Justice: The Life and Times of Stephen S. Wise* (Albany, 1982), chaps. 18-20; this is the source for the ensuing discussion.

19. Allon Gal, *David Ben-Gurion and the American Alignment for a Jewish State, 1938-1942* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, forthcoming), chap. 5; Zvi Ganin, "Activism versus Moderation: The Conflict between Abba Hillel Silver and Stephen Wise during the 1940s," *Studies in Zionism* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 71-95.

20. Cf. Mordecai Waxman, "Diaspora Zionism: Achievements and Problems/Comments," in Moshe Davis, ed., *Zionism in Transition* (New York, 1980), pp. 72 ff.