

“The Jewish State and Jewish Problem”

by Ahad Ha'am (1897)

[...]

Truth is bitter, but with all its bitterness it is better than illusion. We must confess to ourselves that the "ingathering of the exiles" is unattainable by natural means. We may, by natural means, establish a Jewish State one day, and the Jews may increase and multiply in it until the country will hold no more: but even then the greater part of the people will remain scattered in strange lands. "To gather our scattered ones from the four corners of the earth" (in the words of the Prayer Book) is impossible. Only religion, with its belief in a miraculous redemption, can promise that consummation.

But if this is so, if the Jewish State too means not an "ingathering of the exiles," but the settlement of a small part of our people in Palestine, then how will it solve the material problem of the Jewish masses in the lands of the Diaspora?

[...]

Thus we are driven to the conclusion that the only true basis of Zionism is to be found in the other problem, the moral one.

But the moral problem appears in two forms, one in the West and one in the East; and this fact explains the fundamental difference between Western "Zionism" and Eastern *Chibbath Zion*. Nordau dealt only with the Western problem, apparently knowing nothing about the Eastern; and the Congress as a whole concentrated on the first, and paid little attention to the second.

The Western Jew, after leaving the Ghetto and seeking to attach himself to the people of the country in which he lives, is unhappy because his hope of an open-armed welcome is disappointed. He returns reluctantly to his own people, and tries to find within the Jewish community that life for which he yearns -- but in vain. Communal life and communal problems no longer satisfy him. He has already grown accustomed to a broader social and political life; and on the intellectual side Jewish cultural work has no attraction, because Jewish culture has played no part in his education from childhood, and is a closed book to him. So in his trouble he turns to the land of his ancestors, and pictures to himself how good it would be if a Jewish State were re-established there -- a State arranged and organised exactly after the pattern of other States. Then he could live a full, complete life among his own people, and find at home all that he now sees outside, dangled before his eyes, but out of reach. Of course, not all the Jews will be able to take wing and go to their State; but the very existence of the Jewish State will raise the prestige of those who remain in exile, and their fellow citizens will no more despise them and keep them at arm's length, as though they were ignoble slaves, dependent entirely on the hospitality of others. As he contemplates this fascinating vision, it suddenly dawns on his inner consciousness that even now, before the Jewish State is established, the mere idea of it gives him almost complete relief. He has an opportunity for organised work, for political excitement; he finds a suitable field of activity without having to become subservient to non-Jews; and he feels that thanks to this ideal he stands once more spiritually erect, and has regained human dignity, without overmuch trouble and without external aid. So he devotes himself to the ideal with all the ardour of which he is capable; he gives rein to his fancy, and lets it soar as it will, up above reality and the limitations of human power. For

it is not the attainment of the ideal that he needs: its pursuit alone is sufficient to cure him of his moral sickness, which is the consciousness of inferiority; and the higher and more distant the ideal, the greater its power of exaltation.

This is the basis of Western Zionism and the secret of its attraction. But Eastern *Chibbath Zion* has a different origin and development. Originally, like "Zionism," it was political; but being a result of material evils, it could not rest satisfied with an "activity " consisting only of outbursts of feeling and fine phrases. These things may satisfy the heart, but not the stomach. So *Chibbath Zion* began at once to express itself in concrete activities -- in the establishment of colonies in Palestine. This practical work soon clipped the wings of fancy, and made it clear that *Chibbath Zion* could not lessen the material evil by one iota. One might have thought, then, that when this fact became patent the *Choveve Zion* would give up their activity, and cease wasting time and energy on work which brought them no nearer their goal. But, no: they remained true to their flag, and went on working with the old enthusiasm, though most of them did not understand even in their own minds why they did so. They felt instinctively that so they must do; but as they did not clearly appreciate the nature of this feeling, the things that they did were not always rightly directed towards that object which in reality was drawing them on without their knowledge.

For at the very time when the material tragedy in the East was at its height, the heart of the Eastern Jew was still oppressed by another tragedy -- the moral one; and when the *Choveve Zion* began to work for the solution of the material problem, the national instinct of the people felt that just in such work could it find the remedy for its moral trouble. Hence the people took up this work and would not abandon it even after it had become obvious that the material trouble could not be cured in this way. The Eastern form of the moral trouble is absolutely different from the Western. In the West it is the problem of the Jews, in the East the problem of Judaism. The one weighs on the individual, the other on the nation. The one is felt by Jews who have had a European education, the other by Jews whose education has been Jewish. The one is a product of anti-Semitism, and is dependent on anti-Semitism for its existence; the other is a natural product of a real link with a culture of thousands of years, which will retain its hold even if the troubles of the Jews all over the world come to an end, together with anti-Semitism, and all the Jews in every land have comfortable positions, are on the best possible terms with their neighbours, and are allowed by them to take part in every sphere of social and political life on terms of absolute equality.

It is not only Jews who have come out of the Ghetto: Judaism has come out, too. For Jews the exodus is confined to certain countries, and is due to toleration; but Judaism has come out (or is coming out) of its own accord wherever it has come into contact with modern culture. This contact with modern culture overturns the defences of Judaism from within, so that Judaism can no longer remain isolated and live a life apart. The spirit of our people strives for development: it wants to absorb those elements of general culture which reach it from outside, to digest them and to make them a part of itself, as it has done before at different periods of its history. But the conditions of its life in exile are not suitable. In our time culture wears in each country the garb of the national spirit, and the stranger who would woo her must sink his individuality and become absorbed in the dominant spirit. For this reason Judaism in exile cannot develop its individuality in its own way. When it leaves the Ghetto walls it is in danger of losing its essential being or -- at best -- its national unity: it is in danger of being split up into as many kinds of Judaism, each with a different character and life, as there are countries of the Jewish dispersion.

And now Judaism finds that it can no longer tolerate the *galuth* form which it had to take on, in obedience to its will-to-live, when it was exiled from its own country, and that if it loses that form its life is in danger. So it seeks to return to its historic centre, in order to live there a life of natural development, to bring its powers into play in every department of human culture, to develop and perfect those national possessions which it has acquired up to now, and thus to contribute to the common stock of humanity, in the future as in the past, a great national culture, the fruit of the unhampered activity of a people living according to its own spirit. For this purpose Judaism needs at present but little. It needs not an independent State, but only the creation in its native land of conditions favourable to its development: a good-sized settlement of Jews working *without hindrance*¹ in every branch of culture, from agriculture and handicrafts to science and literature. This Jewish settlement, which will be a gradual growth, will become in course of time the centre of the nation, wherein its spirit will find pure expression and develop in all its aspects up to the highest degree of perfection of which it is capable. Then from this centre the spirit of Judaism will go forth to the great circumference, to all the communities of the Diaspora, and will breathe new life into them and preserve their unity; and when our national culture in Palestine has attained that level, we may be confident that it will produce men in the country who will be able, on a favourable opportunity, to establish a State which will be a Jewish State, and not merely a State of Jews.²

This *Chibbath Zion*, which takes thought for the preservation of Judaism at a time when Jewry suffers so much, is something odd and unintelligible to the "political" Zionists of the West, just as the demand of R. Jochanan ben Zakkai for Jabneh was strange and unintelligible to the corresponding people of that time. And so political Zionism cannot satisfy those Jews who care for Judaism: its growth seems to them to be fraught with danger to the object of their own aspiration.

The secret of our people's persistence is -- as I have tried to show elsewhere³--that at a very early period the Prophets taught it to respect only spiritual power, and not to worship material power. For this reason the clash with enemies stronger than itself never brought the Jewish nation, as it did the other nations of antiquity, to the point of self-effacement. So long as we are faithful to this principle, our existence has a secure basis: for in spiritual power we are not inferior to other nations, and we have no reason to efface ourselves. But a political ideal *which does not rest on the national culture* is apt to seduce us from our loyalty to spiritual greatness, and to beget in us a tendency to find the path of glory in the attainment of material power and political dominion, thus breaking the thread that unites us with the past, and undermining our historical basis. Needless to say, if the political ideal is not attained, it will have disastrous consequences, because we shall have lost the old basis without finding a new one. But even if it is attained under present conditions, when we are a scattered people not only in the physical but also in the spiritual sense -- even then Judaism will be in great danger. Almost all our great men, those, that is, whose education and social position fit them to be at the head of a Jewish State, are spiritually far removed from Judaism, and have no true conception of its nature and its value. Such men, however loyal to their State and devoted to its interests, will

¹ The "political" Zionists generally think and say that they were the first to lay down as a principle that the colonization of Palestine by secret and surreptitious means, without organisation and in defiance of the ruling power, is of no value and ought to be abandoned. They do not know that this truth was discovered by others first, and that years ago the *Chibbath Zion* of Judaism demanded that everything should be done openly, with proper organisation and with the consent of the Turkish Government.

² See the essay "Dr. Pinsker" ("[An Open Letter](#)")

³ See the essay "Imitation and Assimilation"

necessarily regard those interests as bound up with the foreign culture which they themselves have imbibed and they will endeavour, by moral persuasion or even by force, to implant that culture in the Jewish State, so that in the end the Jewish State will be a State of Germans or Frenchmen of the Jewish race. We have even now a small example of this process in Palestine.⁴ And history teaches us that in the days of the Herodian house Palestine was indeed a Jewish State, but the national culture was despised and persecuted, and the ruling house did everything in its power to implant Roman culture in the country, and frittered away the national resources in the building of heathen temples and amphitheatres and so forth. Such a Jewish State would spell death and utter degradation for our people. We should never achieve sufficient political power to deserve respect, while we should miss the living moral force within. The puny State, being "tossed about like a ball between its powerful neighbours, and maintaining its existence only by diplomatic shifts and continual truckling to the favoured of fortune," would not be able to give us a feeling of national glory; and the national culture, in which we might have sought and found our glory, would not have been implanted in our State and would not be the principle of its life. So we should really be then -- much more than we are now -- "a small and insignificant nation," enslaved in spirit to "the favoured of fortune," turning an envious and covetous eye on the armed force of our "powerful neighbours" and our existence as a sovereign State would not add a glorious chapter to our national history. Were it not better for "an ancient people which was once a beacon to the world" to disappear than to end by reaching such a goal as this?⁵ Mr. Lilienblum reminds me that there are in our time small States, like Switzerland, which are safeguarded against interference by the other nations, and have no need of "continual truckling." But a comparison between Palestine and small countries like Switzerland overlooks the geographical position of Palestine and its religious importance for all nations. These two facts will make it quite impossible for its "powerful neighbours" (by which expression, of course, I did not mean, as Mr. Lilienblum interprets, "the Druses and the Persians") to leave it alone altogether; and when it has become a Jewish State they will all still keep an eye on it, and each Power will try to influence its policy in a direction favourable to itself, just as we see happening in the case of other weak states (like Turkey) in which the great European nations have "interests."

In a word: *Chibbath Zion*, no less than "Zionism," wants a Jewish State and believes in the possibility of the establishment of a Jewish State in the future. But while "Zionism" looks to the Jewish State to provide a remedy for poverty, complete tranquillity and national glory, *Chibbath Zion* knows that our State will not give us all these things until "universal Righteousness is enthroned and holds sway over nations and States": and it looks to a Jewish State to provide only a "secure refuge" for Judaism and a cultural bond of unity for our nation. "Zionism," therefore, begins its work with political propaganda; *Chibbath Zion* begins with national culture, because only through the national culture and for its sake can a Jewish State be established in such a way as to correspond with the will and the needs of the Jewish people.

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⁴ See the essays "From Eretz Israel", in *Hashiloach* Vol. 1+2.

⁵ The phrases in inverted commas are taken from my note on the Congress. As my critics have misinterpreted them. I have taken this opportunity of explaining their true meaning.