

Jewish Alternatives to Zionism

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Zionism is but one of many ideologies/movements that have competed for the loyalty of Jews as the guarantor of their freedom and security. The fact that it achieved success with the establishment of Israel in 1948 causes people to forget that its success was not pre-ordained. Further, no one can deny that it has come with a heavy cost in both Jewish and Arab lives. From a historic perspective, it may be worth examining other visions to secure a Jewish future. Every road not taken need not be a dead end.

The classic Ultra Orthodox position is that Jews must wait until the Messiah comes before returning to Zion. Zionists are conceived as a bunch of apostates — heretics, socialists, atheists, etc. — who have attempted to pre-empt the will of God. Some ultra-orthodox, in particular, the Lubavitcher Hasidim, have made their peace with Israel. Others have not — and to this day there is an ultra-orthodox Jew who serves with the PLO —on the grounds that Jews should live under Arab rule until God decides to redeem them.

For decades, the leaders of the Reform movement maintained that Jews are not a people or a nationality, but a religious group. Their age-old status in European ghettos as a segregated and oppressed minority was imposed from without, and once abolished, Jews had no reason to think of themselves as a separate people. Judaism is exclusively a religion. It teaches ethical monotheism which is incompatible with nationalism. Reform Jews do not seek to return to Zion. They do not seek to rebuild the Holy Temple. That is why they called their synagogues, “Temples.”

Where Jews are persecuted, they should struggle for religious freedom and equal rights. Their objective should be to integrate into the broader society. Once living in a free society, Jews should adopt it as their “Zion,” which is what early Reform rabbis called the United States. Since Zion was here, there was no Zion to return to.

The classic Reform position against Zionism did not begin to change until after the Balfour Declaration, principally due to the efforts of Louis Brandeis, and was probably still the majority position among Reform Jews until the 1930s and the rise of Nazi Germany.

The major proponent of the classic Reform perspective in the United States was Rabbi Elmer Berger (1908-1996). In 1942, after it became clear that Zionists in Palestine were seeking a “Jewish state,” he formed the American Council for Judaism to combat Zionism in the United States, which had become very popular due to the efforts of Rabbi Stephen Wise. Berger argued that Zionists were substituting worship of state power for worship of a universal God, that a Jewish state would corrupt Jewish values and also violate the rights of the native population. To support a “Jewish state” in Israel was also to jeopardize security of Jews in the Diaspora by raising the specter of disloyalty to their native land.

A biography of Berger has just appeared called *Rabbi Outcast* by Jack Ross. The American Council for Judaism still exists, but it is very small. Yet as public opinion surveys and the U.S. election results consistently show, Jews place domestic concerns such as jobs, taxation, health care, and education far above loyalty to Israel. Younger Jews show the least attachment to the Jewish state.

The classic ultra-Orthodox and Classic Reform positions are explicitly anti-Zionist. For very different reasons, so was the position of the Jewish Labor Bund, founded in Vilna in 1897. It reached its prime in Poland between WWI and WWII as the representative of the Jewish working class, supported by other elements of the Jewish community as well, because it was seen as a champion of Jewish rights. The Bund advocated for socialist revolution—not in the Bolshevik authoritarian manner—but still a radical transformation of society. As such, they saw their task as uniting with non-Jewish socialists in struggling to achieve this objective. Their principle was *doykayt* —here-ness. “Here” being the Diaspora. For the Bund, Jews were primarily a people whose roots were in Eastern Europe, with Yiddish as their language and Yiddish as the basis of their culture. They should preserve their language and culture by struggling for cultural autonomy within Eastern Europe. What this autonomy would consist of, I will discuss later, because their cousins, the Diaspora Nationalists led by Simon Dubnow, more fully developed this idea.

The Bund was much more than a labor union or political party. It excelled in creating a myriad of cultural, educational, social institutions to serve their constituency—from youth and student groups, to women’s groups, to Yiddish schools, newspapers, sports teams, theaters, choruses, orchestras etc. The Workmen’s Circle is still alive as an organization dedicated to Yiddish culture and social justice.

To immigrate to Palestine was to betray the cause of socialist revolution and Jewish cultural autonomy. It was to surrender to anti-Semites who wanted to rid Europe of Jews. Bundists and Zionists were like oil and water because Zionists considered the Diaspora experience to be a disaster and Diaspora Jews to be pathetic, if not suicidal. Bundists and Zionists also clashed on the language issue. The Bund were partisans of Yiddish, the Zionists of Hebrew — and the Zionists took their fervor for Hebrew so far that they sought to stamp out Yiddish in Palestine and in the early years of Israel.

The Bund did establish some branches in the United States and published a Yiddish magazine, but it never took root here. Its closest counterpart here was the Workmen’s Circle, but it was never as hostile to Zionism as the Bund.

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Autonomism or Diaspora nationalism was the brainchild of Simon Dubnow, the great Russian Jewish historian, considered to be one of the intellectual architects of secular humanistic Judaism. He looked at Jewish history and saw that Jews did not really come into their own until they became a Diaspora people. Had Jews remained in ancient Judea, they would have been nothing more than a small people with little impact on the rest of the world. But in the Diaspora, they thrived. How? By establishing varying forms of political/cultural autonomy—in Babylonia both after the destruction of the First Temple and the Second Temple; in Alexandria in the late Greek and early Roman period; in Spain under Muslim rule around the 10th century; in the Ottoman Empire after the expulsion from Spain in the 16th century; and especially in Poland and Lithuania, beginning in the 15th century. Jews had outgrown territorial nationalism and ascended to Diaspora Nationalism, becoming what he called a “cultural spiritual nation.” This was the secret to Jewish continuity.

Dubnow (1860-1941) took part in the 1905 Russian Revolution and afterward founded the *Folkspartey* to fight for Jewish autonomy within the framework of a democratic multi-national state. He hoped that the Russian Revolution of March 1917 would create such a state, but he opposed the Bolshevik Revolution and immigrated to Latvia in 1922. Why Latvia? After WWI, as part of the post-war settlement, many new nations emerged in Eastern and Central Europe out of the ruins of the German, the Russian, and the Austro-Hungarian Empires. For example, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and the Baltic states — Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. As a condition for their international recognition, these nations had to sign “minority rights treaties” to protect the rights of the many minority nationalities who remained there when the new borders were established. The Jews were recognized as a bona fide national minority and were guaranteed state support for the maintenance of their own communal institutions like school systems. Latvia actually had a Minister for Jewish Affairs in its government.

This was the closest realization in East Europe of Dubnow’s principle of “national cultural autonomy,” and of course it was short-lived. But at least on paper and to a limited extent in practice in Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, the right of Jews to cultural autonomy was recognized.

What Dubnow envisioned was a system where, either through state support or through taxes legislated by the Jewish community on the Jewish community, there would be Jewish schools, social welfare agencies, cultural institutions, recognition of Yiddish as an official language, etc. At the same time, Jews would be free and equal citizens of the state where they lived.

Unlike the Bundists, Dubnow was a liberal democrat rather than a socialist. Whereas the Bund was convinced that Jewish capitalists were just as bad as any other capitalist and could not be trusted, Dubnow saw opportunities for Jewish unity across class lines.

Further, unlike the Bund, Dubnow was not anti-Zionist. Rather he was non-Zionist. He welcomed the emigration of Jews to Palestine to establish agricultural settlements and local industry, but he was not sold on the idea of a Jewish state. He firmly believed that Palestine could not absorb more than a small portion of the world’s Jews and that there were many Jews who did not want to live there. For Dubnow, Jewish life in the Diaspora was actually a fuller and richer experience than Jewish life in a single territory.

Like the Bund’s, Dubnow’s ideas did not transplant well to the United States, but his followers did support efforts to form Jewish community councils and the American Jewish Congress to give voice to Jewish communal interests.

Dubnow was a good friend of Ahad Ha’am (1856-1927) and both are considered two of the founding fathers of secular humanistic Judaism. Ahad Ha’am (meaning “one of the people”) was born Asher Ginsberg, and he is best known as the philosopher of cultural Zionism. Yes, he was a Zionist, but in those days, i.e., pre-WWII, there were many who did not insist on a Jewish state. Rather, Ahad Ha’am was in favor of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. He envisioned a “national spiritual center” steeped in Jewish values and devoted to educational and cultural development that would slowly but surely revitalize Diaspora communities throughout the world.

The Diaspora was in decay, he believed, but it was not realistic or practical to expect all Jews to settle in Palestine. And merely settling in Palestine was not the answer either, if it was not based on Jewish ethical principles reflected in a systematic Jewish education and cultural development. He also expressed concern that Jews fleeing persecution to establish new homes in Palestine were disregarding the rights of the native inhabitants. Therefore Ahad Ha’am opposed both the political Zionism of Herzl, whom he saw as a wheeler-dealer with no understanding for Jewish culture, and Labor Zionism which he saw as too focused on land acquisition for its own sake. He also disagreed

with Dubnow because he believed that without a vital Jewish presence in Palestine, the Diaspora would wither.

Jewish culture emanating from Israel—its literature, its films, its music and dances—have no doubt enriched the experience of Diaspora Jews, but the deleterious effect on Diaspora Jews of Israeli's occupation of the West Bank, the oppression of its Palestinian inhabitants, and its alignment with U.S. foreign policy must also be weighed in the balance.

Another variant of Zionism that has been discredited by modern Zionists was bi-nationalism. Its advocates included some very prominent Jews including Albert Einstein, Henrietta Szold, Gershom Sholem, Judah Magnes, Martin Buber, and Hannah Arendt. It was based on the premise that Palestine was already populated with a majority of Arabs, who also had national rights. Therefore it was impossible to justify the establishment of a Jewish state. A Jewish state could be imposed only by force, which was morally repugnant and would lead to endless wars.

As Einstein said, "I should very much rather see reasonable agreement with the Arabs on the basis of living together in peace than the creation of a Jewish state. Apart from practical considerations, my awareness of the essential nature of Judaism resists the idea of a Jewish State with borders, an army and a measure of temporal power, no matter how modest. I am afraid of the inner damage Judaism will sustain."

Magnes, the most prominent bi-nationalist, was an American Rabbi who moved to Palestine in 1923, where he became one of the founders of Hebrew University and its first chancellor. To avoid bloody conflict with the Arab population, it was necessary to share power. As Magnes said "A Jewish Home in Palestine built up on bayonets and oppression is not worth having."

Einstein changed his mind. He supported the 1947 Partition Plan and sided with Israel in the 1948 war. But Magnes actively opposed the Partition Plan, favoring a joint Jewish-Arab administration and eventual integration of a bi-national Israel into a Middle East federation. He died in the United States just before the outbreak of the war in 1948. To the end, he opposed the creation of a "Jewish state" as contrary to Jewish values and unjust to the native population.

Another prominent bi-nationalist, Martin Buber, counterposed what he called "Hebrew humanism" to Jewish nationalism. He also opposed the partition in favor of a bi-national arrangement. Other bi-nationalists believed that the UN should establish a Trusteeship until the parties reached agreement. Or that Jews and Arabs should start with local councils and work their way up to larger jurisdictions. After the war, Buber accepted the existence of Israel, but advocated for compensation for Arab refugees displaced by the war and equal rights for Arab citizens of Israel.

The bi-nationalists consisted of intellectual types like Magnes and Buber but also a segment of the Socialist Zionist movement known as Hashomer Hatzair, based in the kibbutzim. Where they sometimes differed was on the issue of Jewish immigration — whether it should be limited or unlimited; whether it was essential that Jews become a majority of the population or it was enough to achieve parity. But regardless of who was in the majority, bi-nationalists believed that power should be shared equally and the national rights of both groups should be respected.

The bi-nationalist Jewish organization the League for Arab-Jewish Rapprochement and Cooperation actually reached an agreement in 1946 with an Arab organization called New Palestine, but the leaders of New Palestine were assassinated. The problem was that the Arab side, with very few exceptions, did not want a bi-national state. They believed that Palestine had already absorbed more than its share of Jewish immigrants and wanted to cut off further immigration. Outnumbering Jews by 2:1 even in 1947, their leaders were willing only to accept a single state with a Jewish

minority.

Whereas the cultural Zionists and bi-nationalists favored a Jewish homeland rather than a Jewish state, yet still considered themselves Zionists, the Canaanite movement repudiated Zionism altogether. Founded in 1939, it was officially known as the Council for the Coalition of Hebrew Youth. The key word is “Hebrew” because they believed that Jews should return to their roots as a Hebrew-speaking people from the Middle East and sever their relationship with Jews outside Israel. Israel should not be a Jewish state, with ties to Jewish communities around the world, but a Hebrew state with ties to the Middle East. Their brethren were not Diaspora Jews, but the Arabs, their fellow Semites. Judaism was seen as purely a religion that should be discarded as a relic. Jews in Israel should stop thinking of themselves as Jews and start thinking of themselves as Hebrews. The Canaanite movement influenced many Israeli writers, artists, and historians, but faded as a movement by the early 1950s and has no followers today.

A more grounded, but equally obscure Jewish alternative to Zionism was the one known as Territorialism. Its first appearance you may have heard of. It emerged at the Zionist Congress in 1903, where Herzl himself announced that he would be willing to accept Uganda, then a British colony, as a Jewish homeland. (He previously expressed interest in Argentina.) There was an uproar and Herzl backed down. Then in 1905, British Zionist Israel Zangwill broke away from the Zionist movement to found the Jewish Territorialist Organization to look for Jewish homelands outside Palestine. It gave up the ghost a few years after the Balfour Declaration created a “Jewish national home in Palestine.”

But this was not the end. Territorialism came back to life in the form of the Freeland League for Jewish Territorial Colonization, founded in Great Britain in 1935 — this time with a decidedly socialist and Yiddishist orientation.

It was born of despair that time was running out for the Jews of Europe. Its mission was to find an under-populated region of the globe whose government was willing to open it up to Jewish settlement. It was not conceived as a single solution. The hope was that more than one such territory could be found and that at least a fraction of European Jews could be saved.

Like Zionists, the Territorialists believed that Jews had no future in the Diaspora, not only due to the threat of Hitler, but due to the threat of assimilation in countries where Jews lived freely, such as the United States. Where Zionist and Territorialists parted company was over the question of the appropriate homeland. Territorialists looked at Palestine and saw a region with a large Arab majority that would not yield peaceably to a Jewish state. They were also Yiddishists who resented the Zionists rejection of Yiddish.

When Israel was ultimately created, the Freeland League welcomed it as a place of refuge for thousands of dispossessed Jews but issued the following statement: “At this time both because of the limited area and the hostility of the Arab population, we dare not allow the whole Jewish future to depend solely on Israel.” It reiterated its call for “a free land that will be secure from anti-Semitism and assimilation on one hand and statehood and its pitfalls on the other. A land that will be steeped in freedom and Jewish culture and help build a peaceful, productive and authentically Jewish home.”

But where? Its best shot was Australia. Before the outbreak of WWII, the leader of the Freeland league, Isaac Steinberg, traveled to Australia in an attempt to negotiate a deal that would bring 75,000 Jews to the sparsely populated region of Kimberly—or as a second choice, the island of Tasmania. He actually gained the support of certain government officials, public figures, newspapers and trade unions. But there was too much opposition—including from the Zionist movement who did not like the competition.

Next to Australia, the South American nation of Surinam showed the most promise. It was then a Dutch possession. Negotiations between the League and the Dutch government extended from the late 1940s into the early 50s, before they collapsed. The League also expressed interest in Alaska, Canada, Argentina, and Angola. Lowering its expectations, it looked to the United States as the site for all-Jewish towns where Jews would build homes, own farms and business, operate schools and establish cultural institutions, with Yiddish as the prevailing language.

So what happened to the Freeland League? In 1979, it dropped its territorialist goals and transformed itself into the League for Yiddish, led by Mordkhe Schaechter. It still exists today and publishes a Yiddish journal *Afn Shvel (On the Threshold)* edited by Sheva Zucker.

Steinberg was a fascinating figure for another reason. He was the rare combination of an observant and socialist Jew. Representing the Social Revolutionary Party, he actually served as Minister of Justice in the first Bolshevik government. Steinberg did not work on Shabbes, and stories are told that Lenin agreed not to hold meetings of his cabinet during that period. When Steinberg saw that the Bolsheviks were creating a dictatorship, he left the country. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research presented in exhibit on the Freeland League in 2011, and there is an upcoming book on Steinberg by Adam Rovner.

A few words about Birobidzhan. In the late 1920s, the Soviet Union announced the creation of a Jewish autonomous region in an area of the Russian Far East. A small population of ethnic Koreans lived there. The Soviet Union and its supporters worldwide promoted Birobidzhan as a bona fide Jewish homeland where Yiddish would be the official language. For a while, it generated a fair amount of enthusiasm, even among non-communist Jews. About 50,000 Jews immigrated there and to this day, it is the home to a few thousand Jews and a Yiddish newspaper. It cannot, however, be considered a Jewish alternative to Zionism because it was not developed by Jews, but by the Soviet leadership headed by Stalin.

Jewish settlement in the Crimea was another matter. Successful agricultural colonies were established there in the 1920s, before the creation of Birobidzhan, supported by Jewish communists in the Soviet Union and international Jewish organizations. In 1944, Jewish communists close to the Soviet government comprising the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee proposed that the Crimea could be a home for Jews who wanted to start new lives after surviving the horror of the German invasion. The Kremlin at first ignored the proposal but later used it to fabricate accusations that the Committee conspired with the United States and American Jewish "Zionists" to take over the Crimea and sever it from the Soviet Union. The leadership of the JAFC were arrested in 1949 and executed in 1952.

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ne idea that never received serious consideration, but makes sense to me was for the victorious Allies to have provided Jews who survived the Nazi holocaust with a homeland out of German territory. New borders were drawn after World War Two shrinking German territory by giving eastern Germany to Poland, which proceeded to expel the German population, and dividing what remained of Germany in two. Within the context of these and other post-war territorial changes and population transfers, a strong case could have been made for a Jewish state as a form of German reparations.

In 1941 Lord Moyne, British secretary for the colonies, suggested to David Ben-Gurion that

Jewish refugees could be resettled in East Prussia after Germany was defeated and the area's German inhabitants were expelled. Ben-Gurion responded that "the only way to get Jews to go [to East Prussia] would be with machine guns." Maybe so, but West Germany and later united Germany have attracted a steady migration of European Jews. Furthermore, expulsions and machine guns were both factors in the war that created the state of Israel in 1948.

Indeed, there were many Jewish alternatives to what is now considered mainstream Zionism, i.e., standing for the establishment and maintenance of a "Jewish State" in Israel, and they represent(ed) a range of perspectives from anti-Zionists to non-Zionists and Zionist dissenters.

The debate continues today, as some Jews inside and outside Israel question whether Israel should become a state of its citizens rather than of the entire Jewish people.

Whether the bi-national solution can be revived depends on a change in attitude from both sides.

Footnotes