

A Brief History of Zionism

By Olivier Melnick

I. Introduction

In our day and age, one doesn't need to peruse the news for too long before reading about Zionism. Yet, political agendas combined with religious convictions provide us with many possible approaches to an accurate definition of Zionism. Questions arise!

- When and where was Zionism born?
- Who were the major key players in the birth and furtherance of Zionism?
- What is Christian Zionism?
- Is Zionism Racism?

These questions and a few others will be addressed in the following article presenting a brief history of Zionism.

The term "Zionism" and "Zionist" were coined in 1890¹ by Jewish activist Nathan Birnbaum (1864-1937) who also played an important part in the first Zionist Congress in 1897, (renamed the World Zionist Organization in 1960) alongside with its first president, Theodore Herzl. The word "Zion" comes from the Hebrew *tzion*, a reference to Jerusalem and often, by extension, to the land of Israel itself (first mentioned in II Samuel 5:7).

According to scholar Mitchell Bard, Zionism is:
*"The national movement for the return of the Jewish people to their homeland and the resumption of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel."*²

II. Born out of Necessity

European Jews had suffered at the hands of many popes, kings and the masses since the Early Church Fathers. Antisemitism, from theological to social to ethnic, had punctuated Jewish life through the centuries, limiting if not eliminating any semblance of normalcy within the Jewish communities of Europe. The Crusades, the blood libel, the Spanish Inquisition and the first Ghetto, to name a few, were ominous milestones on the timeline of Jewish history. It would eventually get much worse later with the Pogroms and the Holocaust. Yet, something had to change now, as Jewish people felt that they had to "leave the Ghetto" not just physically, but spiritually and emotionally as well. In the midst of their misery, the Jewish people saw a ray of hope with advent of the *Haskalah*.

The *Haskalah*, also known as the "Jewish Enlightenment" was a movement among European Jews of the 17th and 18th centuries advocating a more secularized way of life, hopefully leading to their emancipation and thus better integration into a non-Jewish society. Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) was a German-Jewish philosopher and the father of the *Haskalah*. He even called for a revival of the Hebrew language. The results of the *Haskalah* was a new emphasis on Jewish

¹ Pawel, Ernst: *The Labyrinth of Exile: A Life of Theodor Herzl* (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, New York, New York, 1989) Page 271.

² <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Zionism/zionism.html>

culture and history, much of it apart from religion. It adapted to various Jewish communities across Western and Eastern Europe. For a short while, there seemed to be a period of respite for the Jewish people. Emancipation was working, or was it?

III. The Dreyfus Affair

In 1894 France, at a time when Jewish people thought that their emancipation had prevailed, Captain Alfred Dreyfus was accused of treason against the French Government. The French revolution of 1789 and Napoleon had brought a hope of equality and integration into French society for French Jews, but Anti-semitism as a temporarily inactive volcano of hatred, had just spewed its lava again. As the Dreyfus trial went on, mobs of angry Frenchmen were shouting “Death to the Jews” on the streets of Paris.

The Vienna newspaper *Neue Freie Press* sent their Paris correspondent, Hungarian journalist Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) to follow the Dreyfus Affair. To be sure, Herzl’s obsession with Jewish existence in a land of their own predated the Dreyfus Affair. But it is the very treatment of Captain Dreyfus and by association, the Jews of France, that prompted Theodor Herzl to compile his work of several years into the historic pamphlet *Der Judenstaat* or “The Jewish State”, published in Vienna in 1896 in which he stated:

“Palestine is our unforgettable historic homeland. . . Let me repeat once more my opening words: The Jews who will it shall achieve their State. We shall live at last as free men on our own soil, and in our own homes peacefully die. The world will be liberated by our freedom, enriched by our wealth, magnified by our greatness. And whatever we attempt there for our own benefit will redound mightily and beneficially to the good of all mankind.”³

Herzl was convinced that the only viable solution was a mass exodus of the Jews of Europe back to Israel, the land of their ancestors, as he further stated:

“Political principle will provide the basis, technology the means, and the driving force will be the Jewish tragedy”⁴

But Zionism existed long before Theodor Herzl. We could even argue that God Himself was the original Zionist when in Genesis 12, He declared to Abraham that He would grant him and his descendants, a land as an unconditional and eternal promise. The Abrahamic Covenant can be seen as the foundation of Zionism, established by the creator of the universe Himself in *Gen. 12:1-7*:

*1 Now the LORD said to Abram, “ Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father’s house, To the land which I will show you;
2 And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing;
3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse.
And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”*

³ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Zionism/herzlex.html>

⁴ Sachar, Howard M.: *A history of Israel from Zionism to our time* (Knopf Publisher, New York, 1996) p.40

4 So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Gen. 12:5 And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan; thus they came to the land of Canaan.

Gen. 12:6 And Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. Now the Canaanite was then in the land.

Gen. 12:7 And the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him.

Theodor Herzl if not the originator of the concept of Zionism was definitely the visionary, catalyst and leader of political Zionism. Ernst Pawel in *The Labyrinth of Exile: A Life of Theodor Herzl*, explained:

"He brought to it leadership, organization and a unique blend of fantasy and practical realism, but his most important contribution by far was the messianic image of himself, his stature in the eyes of the Jews and in the eyes of the world".⁵

IV. The First Zionist Congress

In 1897, The First Zionist Congress convened in Basle, Switzerland. It wasn't without struggle that Herzl was able to organize this historic event as most of the Jewish leaders of the time demonstrated some resistance, while the masses expressed interest and even excitement. The message of "We are a people" found in *Der Judenstaadt*, resonated with the Jews of Eastern Europe, victims of much "messianic disenchantment".

As a result, it was at this first congress that Herzl and the delegates adopted the Basle Program and declared that:

Zionism aims at establishing for the Jewish people a publicly and legally assured home in Palestine. For the attainment of this purpose, the Congress considers the following means serviceable:

- 1. The promotion of the settlement of Jewish agriculturists, artisans, and tradesmen in Palestine.*
- 2. The federation of all Jews into local or general groups, according to the laws of the various countries.*
- 3. The strengthening of the Jewish feeling and consciousness.*
- 4. Preparatory steps for the attainment of those governmental grants which are necessary to the achievement of the Zionist purpose.⁶*

⁵ Pawel, Ernst: *The Labyrinth of Exile: A Life of Theodor Herzl* (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, New York, New York, 1989) Page 3.

⁶ http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Zionism/First_Cong_&_Basel_Program.html

Herzl, who was elected president of the First Jewish Congress in 1897, convened six more yearly events until 1902 (eventually, the Congress location was moved to Jerusalem in 1936).

V. Lobbying for the Homeland

In 1897, The First Zionist Congress convened in Basle, Switzerland. It wasn't without struggle that

Herzl started lobbying for the Jewish people's return to a safe land of their own. He first met with German Kaiser Wilhelm II, in Istanbul in 1898 in an effort to convince him to help secure land in Israel. But he wasn't taken very seriously and the Kaiser, influenced by his own anti-Semitic tendencies, flatly rejected Herzl's appeals for a Jewish homeland.

Disappointed and frustrated but not discouraged, Herzl met with British Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain who, as a compromise, offered the Jews the country of Uganda in Eastern Africa. Eventually, in 1903, during the sixth Zionist Congress, and by now rather discouraged, Herzl proposed the move of the Jewish people to Uganda, as a temporary solution until Palestine could be secured. The people reacted immediately and, at the sight of a possible split within the Zionist movement, Herzl decided against the compromise.⁷ Herzl died a year later in Vienna at age 44, having spent most of his adult life fighting for a Jewish homeland.

In Vienna in 1897, he had said, almost prophetically:

"At Basle I created the Jewish State. In five years, perhaps, and certainly in fifty, everyone will see it."

VI. Zionism after Theodor Herzl

One could argue, that during Herzl's life, Zionism was mainly a political movement relying on diplomacy for any sustainable existence. But even Herzl saw that "political Zionism" and "practical Zionism" while having the same goal, had different methods. The chasm would divide further as the Jewish homeland became more of a reality. Herzl had worked hard at gathering funds, yet they hadn't been disbursed significantly and a move from the theoretical to the practical was necessary.

Additionally, there was a serious push for a Hebrew renaissance. The idea of a "cultural Zionism", mostly introduced by Russian Jews, appealed to a wider spectrum within the Jewish community, while "political Zionism" left many of the more religious leaders unsatisfied and unable to relate to the cause.

A key player who had not always seen eye-to-eye with Herzl, was Russian Jewish essayist, Asher Ginsberg (1856-1927), who went by the pen name of *Ahad Ha'am*, Hebrew for "one of the people". Ha'am is known as the father of "cultural Zionism" and his vision was "a Jewish state and not merely a state of Jews"⁸. He felt that Jewish people should return gradually to Palestine while Diaspora Jews should

⁷ Eban, Abba: *My People: The Story of the Jews* (Random House, New York, New York, 1968) Pages 335-337.

⁸ *Ahad Ha'am, The Jewish State and Jewish Problem*, trans. from the Hebrew by Leon Simon c 1912, Jewish Publication Society of America, Essential Texts of Zionism.

be given a vision of the new homeland making them jealous and thus drawing them to a move.⁹

Another important figure in the fight for a cultural rebirth was Hebrew Lexicographer, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda who immigrated to Israel during the first Aliyah¹⁰ of 1881, and dedicated the rest of his life, not without tremendous hardship, to the rebirth of Hebrew as a modern tongue.

Robert St. John, Ben Yehuda's biographer wrote of him in *Tongue of the Prophets*:

"In twenty years he had fathered ten children. Five had died but five still lived. Two of them spoke fluently the language he had spent so much of these twenty years trying to bring back to life. More important, the streets of Jerusalem, the market places, the villages scattered over the desert were thronged with other Jews who spoke this same revived language."¹¹

In the decade following Herzl's death, Zionists influx continued in the Holy Land, and about a hundred thousand pioneers lived there. Times were hard, work days were long, poverty was rampant but the spirit of hope kept Zionism alive. On the eve of WWI, Zionism had become a reality, a fragile one but a reality nonetheless.

VII. The First World War

June 28, 1914 saw the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. As a result, WWI was declared and the face of Europe would be changed forever. At the beginning of WWI, eighty percent of the ten million Jews of Europe lived in the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires¹². The Jewish communities of Europe had been used to hardship and had endured many forms of anti-Semitism, yet the advent of WWI worsened their condition as their lives became once again punctuated by lootings, pogroms and expulsions.

As the war progressed, allied nations ratified various treaties and worked on agreements to share the spoils. It was soon agreed that the Ottoman Empire would have to be divided. One treaty would supersede the previous and by the end of the war, the British had conquered Palestine. In the midst of all negotiations, Britain officially endorsed the Zionist program, and almost overnight, Zionism started to take root in the Holy land. This was a major step in the right direction for the Jewish

⁹ Sachar, Abram Leon: *A History of the Jews* (Knopf Publishing, New York, New York, 1965) pages 360-361.

¹⁰ The First Alyiah of 1881 was one of several consecutives mass returns of Jews in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, usually due to persecution. It took place as a result of the intense Eastern European Pogroms. The second Alyiah of 1904-1914 was a result of the Kishniev pogrom. Both mostly consisted of Orthodox Jews including those in the second Alyiah who started the *kibbutz* movement.

¹¹ St. John, Robert: *Tongue of the Prophets* (Wilshire Book Company, N. Hollywood, California, 1952) page 266.

¹² Eban, Abba: *My People: The Story of the Jews* (Random House, New York, New York, 1968) Pages 341.

people, yet the surprise of a British endorsement would eventually be overtaken by the shock of a British about face.

VIII. The Balfour Declaration

The British government being favorable to a Jewish homeland started to meet with Zionist leaders towards the end of the WWI. One important figure of that time, who would also become Israel's first President, was Chaim Weizmann (1874-1952). Diplomacy continued to play a part in the furtherance of the Zionist agenda and Weizmann was good at it.

In 1906, Weizmann had just helped the British by sharing his recipe to better produce acetone (related to the production of TNT) and thus helped greatly with the war effort. Consequently, he became pretty close to Lloyd George who would later become prime minister. But it was not until he had a meeting with Lord Arthur James Balfour that things begin to crystallize.

Balfour who had tried to convince Weizmann that the Uganda proposal was a good deal, somehow ended up convinced by Weizmann that only the land of Palestine would be acceptable. From that point on, he became a Zionist.

Weizmann met Balfour again when Lloyd George was prime minister and Balfour told him:

"You know, I was thinking of that conversation of ours in 1906 and I believe that when the guns stop firing, you may get your Jerusalem."¹³

In 1917, Weizmann became the first President of the British Federation and worked feverishly with Lord Balfour to develop what would be known as the "Balfour Declaration". This milestone for Zionism vindicated the works of Theodor Herzl, Chaim Weizmann, Nahum Sokolow and other key Zionist leaders. Things appeared to be looking up for the Jewish people and the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

The Declaration stated:

"His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."¹⁴

In 1919, Balfour reiterated in favor of the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine:

"The Four Great Powers [Britain, France, Italy and the United States] are committed to Zionism. And Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, and future hopes, of far

¹³ Ibid. Page 355

¹⁴ Yapp, M.E: The Making of the Modern Near East 1792-1923. (Harlow, England, Longman, 1987) page 290.

profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land. In my opinion that is right.”¹⁵

Just like historian Abba Eban said: *The Balfour Declaration is the decisive victory of the Jewish people in modern history.*¹⁶

In 1922, following the historic move found in the Balfour Declaration, the League of Nations approved the British Mandate for Palestine, giving Britain jurisdiction over the Holy land and thereby authority to help with the securing of a Jewish Homeland.

But during WWI, two completely different promises had been made by the British government. One promise was made to the Arabs as a reward for help against the Ottoman Empire and one to the Jewish people through the Balfour Declaration.

These two conflicting promises would create a serious hindrance to the advancement of Zionism, not to mention force the annihilation of millions of Jewish people during WWII and the Holocaust.

IX. The Second World War

While Zionist pioneers continued to settle in Palestine, the world was again about to enter into conflict and once again the Jewish people would become the scapegoats of humanity, this time in proportions that had never been reached before.

Additionally, the large influx of Jewish people in Palestine led to the Arab revolt of 1936-39. Very concerned, Britain responded to the revolt by appointing a royal commission known as the “Peel Commission” which recommended that Palestine be partitioned into Arab and Jewish lands.

The Peel Commission led to the publishing of the “1939 White Paper” by Britain that would change the promises made by Lord Balfour and seriously limit Jewish immigration into Palestine at a time where Jewish people were being led in droves to the gas chambers.

“The war against the Jews” as author Lucy Dawidowicz¹⁷ called WWII, eventually ended in 1945 with the capitulation of Germany. Three years later another milestone of prophetic proportions was about to happen.

Israel was about to be reborn as a modern nation in 1948. Was it the result of the Holocaust or the persistent toiling of the early Zionist fathers? Both? It is impossible to determine clearly, but it had to happen for future unfulfilled Bible prophecies to eventually take place. The fact remains that much of the ground work laid out by visionaries such as Herzl, Weizmann, Ha’am and Ben Yehuda was about

¹⁵ Edward, Said: *Question of Palestine*. (Vintage Books Edition, 1992) page 16.

¹⁶ Eban, Abba: *My People: The Story of the Jews* (Random House, New York, New York, 1968) Pages 359.

¹⁷ Dawidowicz, Lucy S.: *The War Against the Jews* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, New York.) 1975

to pay off, yet not without a further sacrifice that is still being felt today in the 21st century.

X. 1948: A Nation is Born

In 1947, the United Nations decided to partition Palestine. Following that historic decision, the leader of the World Zionist Congress, David Ben-Gourion (1886-1973) declared that Israel was now a state independent of the British Mandate for Palestine. Israel was accepted as a full member of the UN in 1949

The very next day after the Declaration of Independence, neighboring Arab nations attacked Israel. For the last 63 years, Israel has been constantly under attack and/or at war (1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982, 1987-93, 2000). The boundaries of the Land of Israel have been in the media ever since, being described as either “disputed” or “occupied territories”.

Today, Zionism has become a “cuss” word. The national movement for the return of the Jewish people to their homeland¹⁸ has now become synonymous with racism. As a matter of fact, the United Nations passed resolution 3379 in 1975 declaring that Zionism IS a form of racism, and it would take sixteen years for it to be revoked in 1991. Nevertheless, the stigma is still present and Israel is too often painted as the “New Nazis” of the Middle East. A conference on racism, named “The Durban Conference on Racism” took place in Durban South Africa (Durban I, 2001) and in Geneva, Durban II, 2009 when President Ahmadinejad announced that Zionism is Racism”. This conference seems to be mostly targeted once again at the demonization of Israel. Durban III is set to take place in New York on September 24, 2011.

X. Zionism is here to stay

Many followers of Yeshua (Jesus) look at the Bible and clearly see that God is NOT done with Israel. They see a glorious future for the people and the Land. They understand that the promise of Genesis 12:3 still stands and they want to be in the center of God’s will by blessing the people that He calls “the apple of my eye” (Zechariah 2:8).

These people are often called Christian Zionists as they recognize Israel’s right to the Land and the Jewish people right to return to the Land. Christian Zionism is a noble cause and is part of what every Bible believing Christian should promote because God Himself declared it to be true in His Word.

It is fact that there are a lot of Scriptural evidence validating the claims of Zionism, not to mention that God Himself said that only HE owned the land in Leviticus 25:23¹⁹

*The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, **for the***

¹⁸ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Zionism/zionism.html>

¹⁹ For further study on Israel’s right to the land, consider: Genesis 12:1-7; 17:7-8, 19; 25:5-6; 28:3-4, 35:9-15, Exodus 2:24; 3:8; Deuteronomy 1:8; 3:27-28; Leviticus 26:44-45, Ezekiel 37:11-12, Jeremiah 31:31-34 among many other scriptures.

*land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me.
(emphasis mine).*

Additionally to recognizing that Jewish people have the right to a land of their own, we must also recognize that Jewish people have a claim to the Jewish Messiah, Yeshua of Nazareth. It is then incumbent on every Christian to share the message of hope of the Jewish Messiah with the original messengers.

XI. Conclusion

The foundation for Zionism was established by God in the book of Genesis. It continues to run through like an uninterrupted thread through the tapestry of Jewish history. If Zionism has existed for a long time, we also cannot deny that God used people like Herzl, Ha'am, Ben Yehuda, Weizmann, Ben-Gourion, Golda Meir and many others to further promote the Jewish people right to the Land of Israel. What God established, no man can destroy (Jeremiah 31:35-37).

“Zionism is nothing more — but also nothing less — than the Jewish people’s sense of origin and destination in the land linked eternally with its name.

Abba Eban

Zionism sometimes just refers to the ancient desire of the Jewish people to return to their homeland - often it includes a religious sense as well, in terms of the coming of the Messiah. Political Zionism often refers specifically to efforts made in the last 100 years or so to gain political independence for the Jewish people, it generally is distinct from the religious aspects. There was, for example, a brief idea to possibly gain territory in Africa. This idea was universally rejected, and the land of Israel, the Jews' ancient and ancestral homeland was identified as the only acceptable... You have this long history of Jewish persecution. In fact, much of Jewish tradition today is around remembrances of these various tragedies, these various persecutions. Zionism, Jewish nationalist movement that originated in eastern and central Europe in the latter part of the 19th century that has had as its goal the creation and support of a Jewish national state in Palestine, the ancient homeland of the Jews. Learn more about the history of Zionism in this article. A brief treatment of Zionism follows. For fuller treatments, see Israel: Zionism; Judaism: Zionism. In the 16th and 17th centuries a number of "messiahs" came forward trying to persuade Jews to "return" to Palestine. Watch the "Zionism: A very brief history" video at BBC Ideas. Explore other related content via our curated "An A-Z of -isms" playlist. Confused about what Zionism actually is? Here's a three-minute history from SOAS professor, historian and author, Colin Shindler. Made by Somethin' Else, 23 July 2019. More information about the video. The difference between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. BBC Israel country profile. Share. Zionism: A Brief History has been added to your Cart. Add gift options. Buy used Michael Brenner's brilliant short survey of one of the most interesting and embattled movements of the contemporary world is the most reliable introduction available in English into a subject that has become in recent years a matter of much controversy, very often on the basis of ideological prejudice or simply ignorance. This admirably objective review of a multi faceted movement deals both with its cultural and political origins and manifestations." - -Walter Laqueur, author of The History of Zionism, 1972. About the Author. About Michael Brenner