

The Goals of Zionism Today

by Eliezer Schweid

On the occasion of the centenary of the First Zionist Congress (1897-1997), and verging on the jubilee of the State of Israel (1948-1998), the World Zionist Organization is engaging intensively in rethinking, updating its assumptions, and restructuring organizationally in order to meet changing needs in both Israel and the Diaspora.

Foremost among the events leading up to these changes are the collapse of the USSR with all its implications and the mass immigration from the former Soviet Union to Israel, where the newcomers have made a successful socio-economic adjustment. Within another decade, the immigration potential from the former Soviet Union will probably have been realized in full; by then, Israel will be home to a majority of the Jewish people.

The peace process is no less of a watershed because, if successful, it will integrate the State of Israel into a web of normal relations with its surroundings and with the international political system.

Additional changes have occurred and are continuing in the social structure and political trends of Israel and Diaspora Jewry.

It can be said that the changes in the Diaspora are part of a normalization process: a feeling among Diaspora Jews that they are at home and the belief that the center of gravity of their activities and interests is located in their countries of residence. I am speaking of Diaspora Jewry in the free world, of course, but one should keep in mind that the Diaspora no longer has large pockets of distress. Although this situation may change, a change for the worse is not foreseeable today. Indeed, all the events that I have mentioned create the feeling that we must reexamine our situation and the purpose of our activities from the perspective of the fulfillment of Zionism.

On the "Post-Zionist" Syndrome

I shall begin with a few words about the syndrome known as post-Zionism, which posits that - for whatever reasons - the Zionist enterprise has or should come to an end. I will then attempt to examine some perspectives on the continuation of the Zionist enterprise, as I see it.

The syndrome known as post-Zionism is very complex and by no means uniform.

Importantly, its ideological manifestations represent a small circle of adherents. Although they are highly vocal and are heard often in the print and electronic media, they reflect the opinions of elites that have little influence on Israeli society. However, post-Zionism is also a social and sociological process, and as such it is much

broader and more influential than we tend to admit: it is manifested in many aspects of government policy and the attitudes of certain political parties.

Thus, we should first contemplate this phenomenon from the ideological perspective. There are two types of post-Zionist ideology. The first views Zionism favorably, even very favorably, but concludes that Zionism has attained all its goals and has nothing left to do. After all, the goal of normalizing the Jewish people has been achieved, whether precisely as Herzl envisioned it or not. Therefore, let us now start to strive for the normal goals of nations that dwell securely in their states, such as raising the standard of living and promoting social and cultural well-being.

The change in this sense occurred after the Six-Day War (1967), when the perception arose that the State of Israel had proved that it had consolidated itself sufficiently. It could no longer be "thrown into the sea," and it was now time to take the last steps to achieve normalization in relations with our Arab neighbors. As we know, this provided a background for polar controversy over the nature of the steps required.

According to one segment of the nation, the war cleared the way to realizing the utopian goal - or, if you will, the "messianic" goal - of the State of Israel. They hope to see the consolidation of a "greater Israel," with massive immigration from the former Soviet Union, which would enable Israel to realize its goal of the ingathering of the exiles as well as its goal of peace, since its enemies would be obliged to accept its existence. The rest of the nation believed that peace should be achieved immediately in order to complete the Zionist enterprise, for Israel had registered achievements that permitted it to negotiate with its neighbors, strike compromises that would rectify the injustice done to the Palestinian people and thereby attain the goal of normalization. Essentially, peace was presented as the goal that would culminate the enterprise and role of Zionism. The post-Zionism that defined itself in this manner indeed argued that Israel should progress toward peace as a positive culmination of the Zionist enterprise. According to this conception, Zionism has achieved its goal and should no longer strive for anything beyond it.

The second type of post-Zionist ideology is, in essence, a reincarnation of the pre-Holocaust, pre-statehood anti-Zionist ideology.

Until the establishment of the State, the Zionist movement represented a minority of the Jewish people and was opposed by various parts of the Jewish people. Its efforts commanded no Jewish consensus by any means. Only after the Holocaust and the establishment of the State did a pan-Jewish consensus take shape; only then did Zionism become a matter of agreement that united all segments of Jewry in Israel and the Diaspora.

This consensus held together until the Six-Day War. Afterwards, and especially after the War of Attrition (1968-1970) and the Yom Kippur War (1973), one began to hear echoes of re-assessment regarding the correctness of Zionism.

The primary factor in this reassessment was the feeling among many young Israelis that Zionism demanded too high a personal price for its fulfillment, especially from the young. In this context, the harsh trauma of the Yom Kippur War should be borne in mind. Many young people concluded that the price was disproportionate to their

personal gain in attaining the national goal of a Jewish state, and that from this standpoint it was necessary to ask whether Zionism was correct and true to its pretensions. In other words, was Zionism a solution to the problems or hardships of the Jewish people?

Beyond the feeling that they had been personally wronged as individuals, these young people observed that those who had extricated themselves from the circle of fear were Diaspora Jews, and if any Jews faced the danger of annihilation and Holocaust, it was those in and around Israel. Moreover, even if the State of Israel can prevent a Holocaust, as it in fact did in the Yom Kippur War, the price is too high and the Jews have other options for survival.

This cleared the way for reassessment of the other aspect of the justness of Zionism: the high price of the wars also revived the syndrome of severe guilt with regard to the Palestinians, who had been wronged, even though, in my opinion, not by a Zionist "original sin." The debate over this question was rekindled, for it was perfectly clear to these people that an open wound had developed and was not allowing the conflict to end.

Apart from these two main factors, American "post-modernism" began to permeate Israel after the Six-Day War and has made a strong impact.

Israel was able to impede the effects of post-modernism until the Six-Day War by applying social and economic policies dictated by the need to absorb masses of immigrants. These barriers fell after the Six-Day War, and the influence of the political, social and cultural conceptions of post-World War II American liberalism penetrated Israeli society with great momentum.

It is worth bearing in mind in this context that Zionism, as a national democratic movement, developed against the backdrop and under the patronage of the national democratic philosophy of Western Europe. The American liberal democratic doctrine, in contrast, is non-national and, to a large extent, is anti-national and individualistic in the extreme. In its basic model, it views the state as belonging to its citizens, in contrast to a nation-state that belongs to the nation as a historical being. Thus, it views the state as responsible for the well-being and happiness of its citizens as individuals, not the nation's survival as an autonomous entity.

The adoption of these concepts of liberal democracy, the acceptance of their attendant ethos of individualism and competitiveness, and the sense that the State of Israel had wronged the Palestinians - including those who were Israeli citizens - caused the disintegration of basic national perception from which Israeli democracy had originally been forged.

After the Six-Day War, one began to hear allegations of a substantive contradiction between Israel's being a Jewish state and its being a democracy.

According to this argument, if Israel wishes to be a full-fledged democracy, it must cease to be a Jewish state. The fact that Jews live in Israel and hold Israeli citizenship as individuals should have nothing to do with the constitutional complexion of the state itself. Therefore, Israel should be the "state of its citizens."

This perspective obviously results in the obliteration of Israel's Zionist essence, because if Israel is not Jewish, neither should it practice Zionist policies in absorbing Jewish immigrants and nurturing Jewishness as a model of cultural and national identity.

These, more or less, are the basic theses of ideological post-Zionism. The assimilation of the basic concepts of American liberal democracy and, foremost, the adoption of the social concepts of this democracy; the free-market economic ethos; the abandonment of the socialist social-policy parameters that had guided Israel as an immigrant-absorbing country until the Six-Day War; and the forfeit of integrationist social aspects in education and in the army, all for the sake of an ideology of unrestrained competition - all of these, after the fact, turned post-Zionism into a form of social behavior and socio-economic policy.

In this context, I stress that few Israelis regarded this as an ideological relinquishing of Zionism. On the contrary: most assumed that the individual's economic gain would correspond with advances in national well-being, immigrant absorption and integration in schools and that this would mark the culmination of Zionist achievement.

Has the State of Israel Achieved Its Goals?

I believe that the challenge of the first kind of post-Zionism, that which eschews anti-Zionism, should be taken very seriously. The question is this: Has the State of Israel indeed achieved its goals, or does it still have a major, substantial goal to achieve?

It is argued that Zionism is very close to achieving at least one of its main goals. My opinion is that this claim is sufficiently grounded.

If we define Zionism in terms of Herzl's political doctrine, the State of Israel did not achieve its political goal when established but has achieved it, or is very close to achieving it, today.

Israel is already the largest Jewish center in the world, and within twenty years it will almost certainly be home to the majority of Jews. The following factors will bring this about:

- Israel will take in all the immigrants who wish to come from the countries of the former Soviet Union, and may absorb those from other places where Jews still meet with some degree of hardship.
- Israel is demographically healthy. Because it experiences natural increase, its age pyramid is sound. It has a majority of young people and a minority of elderly. Although the Jewish population is not keeping up with the Palestinian population in this respect, it is nevertheless experiencing natural increase.

Among Diaspora Jewry, the opposite holds true: its population is rapidly dwindling because of assimilation through intermarriage. Let us not forget that the intermarriage rate in the United States has already surpassed the fifty-percent mark. Furthermore, Diaspora Jewry does not exhibit positive natural

increase. Because its families, other than those among the ultra-orthodox, have few children, it has fewer young people and more elderly.

Thus, the Diaspora Jewish population is dwindling and the Israeli Jewish population is increasing. Within twenty years, these trends will make the State of Israel the largest, most consolidated, and most stable Jewish center in the world in all respects. This is a very impressive achievement.

- The peace process is leading to the formation of normal relations with the countries of the region. If the process is successfully culminated, the people who dwell in Zion will find themselves living in a sound political environment.

On the basis of the reality being created by these factors, among others, one may say that Herzl's political vision has come true. The same may be said about Diaspora Jewry in the free world, for Herzl believed that Jews who do not relocate to the Jewish state would live under conditions similar to those prevailing today in their countries of residence.

Bear in mind that when the State of Israel was established, even American Jewry was very far from feeling secure and at home.

From this perspective, if we wish to adopt it, the Zionist vision has been realized in its political sense.

Here, however, is the great irony: Whenever Jews manage to attain political normalization, they face a totally different danger, one that rested at the root of the Zionist enterprise and may have been the decisive factor in the awakening of the Zionist movement.

On this point we need to examine other conceptions of Zionism, especially the spiritual Zionism of Ahad Ha'am. In the early twentieth century, Ahad Ha'am diagnosed two great questions for the Jewish people. He called one the "question of the Jews," and the other the "question of Judaism." The "question of the Jews" was the distress caused by antisemitism. This was not only the insults and humiliations that the Jews suffered in Central and Western Europe, but the pogroms and economic antisemitism in Eastern Europe. The main motivating force there was the frightful hostility that propelled multitudes of Jews to emigrate.

Economic duress subjected the Jewish people to a process of proletarianization since they were denied any source of livelihood in their countries of residence. This reduced the Jews to utter destitution. The Russian government's policy aimed to rid the country of the Jews, thus prompting massive waves of emigration, mostly to America.

To a certain extent, Zionism was built on this outward propulsion. Ahad Ha'am, however, believed that the Land of Israel could not provide an answer to economic hardship. Telling starving Jews to come to the Land of Israel, he said, was tantamount to offering them stones instead of bread. Truth to tell, conditions there were harsh in those years, and Ahad Ha'am's argument was justifiable. Thus, he advised immigration to the United States as the only available solution.

Be this as it may, Ahad Ha'am considered it the task of Zionism to confront the "question of Judaism", not the "question of the Jews" - and the "question of Judaism" was assimilation. Assimilation originated in the phenomenal attractive power of the new, modern culture, into which Jews wanted to blend. In other words, assimilation was caused by the very positiveness of the modern world. Ahad Ha'am assumed that if the Jews wished to continue existing as a culturally distinct people, they would have to fashion a new culture that would maintain continuity with its identity and affinity with its origins, but that would be receptive to everything positive in modern culture and would assimilate its scientific, technological and humanistic achievements in full. This, however, made statehood in the Land of Israel necessary, because such a culture could not be created in the Diaspora. Every people needs a homeland and an autonomous framework within which it may develop a complete, full-fledged, self-standing culture that meets the needs of life. From this kernel, Ahad Ha'am developed his Zionist doctrine, which championed the establishment of a "spiritual center" for the Jewish people in Eretz-Israel.

The question, then, is whether the establishment and consolidation of the State of Israel brought with it the fulfillment of Ahad Ha'am's idea, too? Has the new cultural identity taken shape? Has assimilation been arrested?

It seems sufficiently clear that the answer is no. The syndrome of assimilation and loss of Jewish identity in the Diaspora, mentioned above, is self-evident to us all. I believe, however, that assimilation is taking place in Israel, too, with tremendous intensity. Consequently, it is not enough for Jews to live in their own independent, sovereign state, where they can shape their own lives, to constitute a secure barrier to assimilation. The country provides a framework, the tools and the potential, but one must take action, engage in creative endeavor and - first of all - want to create a new cultural identity.

One may of course dispute the logic of the assimilation-in-Israel claim. Assimilation in its classic form is a process experienced by a minority that lives amid a large, wealthy majority. The minority is swallowed up by the majority society, knowingly and voluntarily obfuscates the indicators that distinguish it from the majority and disappears.

It seems that as long as they live in their own state and speak its vernacular, Israelis cannot assimilate. However, post-modernistic culture proves that this is possible. The fact of *yerida* - emigration of young Israelis - and the way they fit into American culture illustrates this process. Israeli emigrés preserve only a limited Jewish cultural identity and feel at home in the American cultural environment. They are already attuned to it, meaning that even in Israel their Jewish roots were weak and a strong commitment to Jewish history, Jewish sources and the Jewish way of life was not acquired. Even in Israel they created a contemporary culture acquired through the media directly from American culture. Anyone who so desires can stroll at leisure through foreign cultural landscapes in Israel and can find assimilation in a gamut of values and symbols: political, ethical, social, creative, spiritual and even linguistic.

Again, I believe that most Israeli Jews are still traditional or national in orientation. Most are firmly rooted in the heritage of their people and do not wish to disengage from it. Most still value national life, national identity, national values and a national culture. Nevertheless, the dynamics of assimilation have had a strong impact, first

affecting the "street" and then thrusting inward. Because the process has had a substantial impact on family and school life, it may harm the settings in which people are educated and national and traditional culture is preserved and developed.

**The major goal of Zionism today:
to build the spiritual center**

If this account is correct, the simple conclusion is that the major goal of Zionism today, now that the Jewish state is an incontrovertible fact, is to build the spiritual center.

What must be done in order to build the spiritual center?

I consider it a constitutional, educational and creative enterprise.

First and foremost is the struggle for the Jewishness and Jewish identity of the State of Israel. This struggle is the crux of the campaign today, since the question is whether Israel will continue to be a Jewish and democratic state in the sense set forth in the Declaration of Independence, i.e., in the same sense as Israel is defined as the state of the Jewish people as a whole.

This definition is given a basis in legislation such as the Law of Return. The significance of the Law of Return is that it deems all Jews qua Jews potential citizens of Israel and likens them to repatriates. As soon as they land in Israel, Jews exercise the privilege, kept in reserve for them, to be citizens in their own country. Beyond the Law of Return, a covenant was ordained between Israel and the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency, as the legally recognized representatives of the interests of Jewry in Israel.

The covenant statute says, inter alia, that "*The State of Israel considers itself a creation of the entire Jewish people, and its gates are open, in keeping with its laws, to every Jew who wishes to immigrate thereto.... The goal of the ingathering of the exiles, a central fixture in the tasks of the State of Israel and the Zionist Movement in our days, requires constant efforts by the Jewish people in the Diaspora and therefore the State of Israel expects all Jews, singly and collectively, to participate in building the State and facilitating mass immigration of Jews thereto and believes it necessary to unify all Jewish groupings behind this goal.*"

This law, which gives the World Zionist Organization its status in Israel, makes Israel a Zionist state, i.e., the state of the entire Jewish people.

The same conception is evident in the passage of the Yad Vashem Law. According to this statute, the role of Yad Vashem is to extend a "citizenship of remembrance" in Israel to all those annihilated in the Holocaust. In other words, the State of Israel regards itself as the state of all Jewish victims of the Holocaust. They are its citizens. In this law, the State of Israel plays the symbolic role of the redeemer of Jewish history and historical memory and such an action expresses profound affiliation and identification with the Jewish heritage.

At the root of these laws is the State's commitment to and responsibility for all of Jewry, both by virtue of its being the place where the Jewish collective identity is manifested, and through a continual connection with the people's origins. The Declaration of Independence notes the prophets' vision of Israel as a source and basis of basic social concepts and certain national and democratic perspectives. Israel is democratic not because of an exogenous idea but because of its association with the prophets' principles of justice and visions of peace, i.e., attachment to the Jewish sources and allegiance to their vision.

This hands us a monumental Zionist task: to ensure that Israel remains a Jewish state in the foregoing senses and that it implements this commitment correspondingly in its educational, creative, and spiritual processes. This imperative should dictate the cultural messages of state-sponsored schools and other institutions of education.

Another question is this: how should the State of Israel interrelate with Diaspora Jewry? Relations thus far have been played out between political actors on one side and economic actors on the other, to the exclusion of intellectual elite, young people and a fortiori the common folk. Parenthetically, one should be aware that the vast majority of American Jews have never been to Israel. A very small group of Jews visits almost every year, and members of a Jewish leadership echelon come to Israel more than once a year ex officio, as part of their activities. The vast majority of American Jews, however, are utter strangers to Israel. They do not avoid other countries; they travel to all sorts of overseas destinations, but not to Israel.

Therefore, it is important to create an infrastructure in Israel for extensive educational and cultural activity, with creative encounters between Jewish intellectuals and groups of Jewish youngsters, here in Israel, and encounters with rank-and-file Jews who will visit Israel and observe something representative of Jewish culture and identity, i.e., the spiritual assets and Jewish values that one finds here.

For the sake of personal fulfillment, those who wish to preserve their Jewish identity and raise their children as Jews should learn Hebrew. Jews who lack a common language are disengaged not only from those of us living in Israel but also from the literary sources of the Jewish heritage. They lack the common cultural language that we as a people need.

Hebrew should also be a language of culture, and for this to happen, education in Israel must focus - as it has completely ceased to do - on cultural socialization. Education today deals only with vocational socialization. Only in preschool or in the first and second grades does the focus on cultural socialization still prevail, because young children are still incapable of studying science, computers and other disciplines that amount to vocational acknowledgment of social competitiveness.

Thus, we face the challenge of recreating and re-establishing the shared cultural language. This is the comprehensive, inclusive significance of a "spiritual center."

Since the establishment of the State of Israel, the Zionist movement has communicated only with Jews in the Diaspora, not with those in Israel. It has ceased to be an Israeli movement. Here it is just a bureaucracy. Furthermore, we do not elect the leaders of and delegates to the institutions of the Zionist movement; we merely appoint them through the mechanism of Knesset elections. As a sociocultural

movement that deals in educational and cultural activity and raises donations for its aims, there is no Zionist movement in Israel.

It is time for Israeli Jews to realize that today they are no poorer, and may even be richer, than much of Diaspora Jewry. It is time for them, too, to contribute to Jewish educational and cultural endeavors through a Zionist fundraising appeal in Israel.

I have expressed my proposal in very broad contours that are far from being a program. It seems to me, however, that the central message in a year dedicated to Zionism should be as follows: the mission of Zionism, which we have hardly begun to pursue, is the creation of the spiritual center with its cultural accouterments, and the fashioning of the requisite educational and cultural tools.

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