

The Philosopher as Director-General: Emile Meyerson and the Jewish Colonization Association in Palestine

In the early morning hours of December 23, 1907, Emile Meyerson (1859-1933) put the finishing touches to the manuscript of his first book *L'identite et la realite*,² a scholarly work in the field of epistemology - a philosophical investigation of the basis of knowledge. Plagued by severe insomnia Meyerson did not go to bed but decided to write a letter to his sister Frania who was still living in their native town of Lublin in eastern Poland.³

Considering the completion of his book as the conclusion of a significant chapter in his life, Meyerson described at length his life in France, where he had come in 1882 after graduating in chemistry in Germany. In Paris he got a position as a foreign news editor with the well-known news agency Havas. It was a very convenient position which left ample time for his main interest: philosophy. "On average there were no more than two hours of work a day", wrote Meyerson. "From time to time one had to remain at the office and wait for the news but nothing prevented me from using this time for proceeding with my research. The afternoons were unconditionally free and I was able to spend them at the library".⁴ And yet, when in 1897 he was offered the position of director-general of the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA), he decided to accept the offer knowing very well that the new post would be most demanding and would leave him very little time to devote to his research. He accepted the offer, he wrote his sister, despite the fact that he was not a Zionist, not even a Palestinophile. "I did it - he wrote - to satisfy a vision of mine, I did it - only the French could have invented such an expression - pour coucher avec ma chimere".⁵

Meyerson did not elaborate, neither in the letter to his sister nor in any other written communication, upon the nature of this chimere. But judging from his initial plan for the JCA's involvement in Palestine⁶ and from hints in letters to friends, it is not difficult to understand what he had in mind and why the matter had been so important for him. A follower of Herbert Spencer, Meyerson wanted to experiment in Palestine with the British philosopher's ideas on the evolutionary character of human society. Born in Derby, England, in 1820, Spencer became in the second part of the nineteenth century one of the best known and most influential European philosophers and social scientists. Even Herzl, who had never subscribed to his ideas, wanted to know Spencer's opinion on his work *Der Judenstaat* and sent him a copy of the brochure.⁷ Spencer's main premise was that the same rules of natural selection that govern the animal world apply to human societies as well. Men, like other species, are engaged in a constant struggle for survival in which only the fittest survive, the fittest being the most intelligent, the best capable of adaption to the challenges of life. For Spencer this was a beneficial process which contributed constantly to a refinement of the human species and would one day result in the complete abolition of violence in human society. For this beneficial process to take place one main condition must be fulfilled: absolute non-intervention by the government, short only of maintaining an army and police force. Should governments establish schools and hospitals which are open to all, they would interfere with the process of natural selection, artificially preventing the disappearance of the weaker elements whose offspring will carry their genes into future generations. If, on the other hand, the weaker elements are left to their own devices, they will simply disappear in due course and with them, their potential harmful influence on future generations.

Meyerson's adoption of these theories was not, to be sure, the first instance in which the approach to the problems of Jewish settlement in Palestine was based on Spencerian

principles. He was preceded by Ahad Ha-am, the well-known thinker and member of the proto-Zionist Hibbath Zion and later of the Zionist movement, for whom "Herbert Spencer was a key inspiration", to quote from a recent biography of Ahad Ha-am by Steven Zipperstein.⁸ But there was also a cardinal difference between the two: while Ahad Ha-am, throughout his public career, lacked any possibility for the implementation of his ideas, Meyerson, backed by the enormous resources of the JCA and not confronted by any real opposition inside the organization, was able not only to make plans but, as we shall shortly see, to put them to the test.

It was probably Waldemar Haffkine, the well known bacteriologist - and another East European Jew who established himself in Paris - who introduced Meyerson to the problems of Jewish colonization of Palestine in the mid-1890s. The main issue was that the colonization project, entirely financed by Edmond de Rothschild, was under his very pressing tutelage, suffered from constant interference by his officials and was corrupted by enormous subsidies handed out to all. For Meyerson, who was already, as it seems, imbued with Spencerian values, it must have been a difficult situation to stomach. Still, aware of Rothschild's powerful standing, he refrained from criticizing him in public, at least not directly. At closed meetings he spoke of the necessity to use only "selected human material" in order to reach permanent achievements in Palestine. "If we let the compassion for the wretched interfere with the selection of settlers for our project in Palestine", he said, "we shall break faith with the most basic rules of the enterprise. Helping the poor is a noble task, but our mission - bringing about better times for our people - is even nobler".⁹

Meyerson did not have to wait long for the opportunity to implement his ideas. In 1897, as we have seen, he was offered the post of director-general of the JCA. Established in 1891 by the fabulously rich Baron Maurice de Hirsch, the JCA's original aim was to promote emigration of East European Jews to Argentina and other overseas locations. But after Hirsch's death in 1896 the association's new directorship, composed mainly of eminent French Jewish personalities, became increasingly interested in operating in Palestine as well. Even before he was officially appointed to the new post, Meyerson submitted his blueprint for action in Palestine to Narcisse Leven, the new president of the JCA.¹⁰

Meyerson's plan was that the JCA should buy a large tract of land in Palestine and consider it a source of income. A workers' farm would be established on the land, exactly as a private owner would do to generate profit from his investment. On the farm Jewish workers would be employed and very strict discipline would be introduced: "Even minor negligence will be pitilessly punished by firing the offenders". After two or three years the strongest and most willing workers would remain at the farm, becoming the avant-garde of the future Jewish settlement force in Palestine. The JCA would then extend them the necessary help to establish farms of their own where the next generation of laborers would find work, the ablest of whom would, in turn, establish farms of their own. And thus, powered by natural selection, the wheel would continue to spin, continually improving the quality of the Jewish settler.

In 1899 Meyerson visited Palestine for the first time, inter alia to supervise the establishment of the farm for which a suitable tract of land had in the meantime been bought in Lower Galilee. In the midst of the visit he received a cable from Paris informing him of Rothschild's intention to transfer his colonies to the JCA's management.¹¹ The limited experiment with the workers' farm suddenly became a gigantic task, the main problem being that the colonies were built on a completely different basis of tutelage and intervention. "You would not be able", he wrote in 1902 to his friend Haffkine, "to imagine

the depth of despair which descended on me. There was even a moment when I thought to advise the JCA to quit Palestine all together. But how could I forsake an enterprise in which such gigantic resources were invested? How could I have been sure that the gangrene which attacked the corpse did not result from the artificial life which had been imposed on the project? Wouldn't it be possible that with different management of the Rothschild colonies, the cure would be found for the the entire enterprise?"¹² Soon afterwards Meyerson was to learn that there are limits to power. Answering Haffkine's charges that the JCA was too soft in Palestine he wrote: "You advise me to be severe, to support only those who are successful and to let the others disappear. This is, to be sure, not only a very just principle but the only just principle. This is the way of nature, of life. It is by constant elimination of ill-adapted individuals that the perfectly adapted type, agreeable, capable and worthy of surviving is created. That we are unable to implement this principle in Palestine is the most formidable of all obstacles that we encounter on our way".¹³

What prevented Meyerson from employing these severe methods in Palestine was his compassion for people who "had excellent reasons for their failure".¹⁴ The first of them was that grave mistakes were committed by those who run the Palestinian enterprise. "These were the faults of the collective and not of the individuals in question", he wrote to Haffkine, "and even if we consider their mistakes as being individual they were after all, only mistakes of evaluation. They thought themselves to be suitable for a profession which was entirely unknown to them and they were wrong. Have I the right to sacrifice them? Have I, who eats well, the right to sentence them to hunger because of an idea of mine which is after all only an idea? And what if I am mistaken? And what if, with all the suffering that I create, and which I could so easily have prevented, I would fail to reach the goal which I long to achieve?"¹⁵ Along with moral conflicts there was also a technical problem which placed serious limitations on Meyerson's attempts to implement Spencerian ideas in Palestine: the JCA was, after all, by definition a philanthropic society (and philanthropy, needless to say did not go well with the truly natural "survival of the fittest" that Spencer envisioned) and Meyerson felt that he had no right to proceed with such severe measures.

But contrary to what one would expect, it was the former Rothschild colonies, founded on an entirely mistaken basis and being, for reasons already mentioned, immune to Meyerson's most severe reforms, that became relatively prosperous and independent during the first decade of the twentieth century. The workers' farm, on other hand, built from scratch on Spencerian principles and where Meyerson was not limited by moral considerations, quickly failed. The main reason for the farm's failure was, it seems, Meyerson's uncompromising approach that it should make a profit or at least cover its own expenses. If the JCA were to subsidize the farm it would be no different from the Rothschild administration and the entire scheme would not work. Meyerson would not yield to reports by agronomists, duly sent by the JCA to the farm to investigate the reasons for its deficit, who maintained that the farm was on the right track and would, indeed, generate income in the years to come. In 1912, after only eleven years of operation, the farm was closed down and the land sold.

The lesson of Meyerson's Spencerian experiment in Palestine seems to be twofold. Some of the Spencerian ideas, such as non-intervention, for example, worked quite well when combined with pragmatism, compassion and common sense. When, on the other hand, Spencerian principles were applied in their most extreme form, without any pragmatic adjustments and moral considerations, they resulted in the complete failure of the enterprise in question.

-
1. This publication is a revised version of a lecture delivered at the conference "France, Western Europe and Palestine, 1799-1917" organized by the Centre de recherche français de Jérusalem in November 1998. I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers of the conference for their permission to publish the article on Internet.
 2. Emile Meyerson, *L'identité et la réalité*, Paris, 1908.
 3. Emile Meyerson to Frania Meyerson, 23.12.1907, Central Zionist Archives (CZA), A408/6.
 4. *Ibid*, p. 4.
 5. *Ibid*, p. 5.
 6. See below.
 7. Theodor Herzl, *Zionistisches Tagebuch, 1895-1899*, Berlin, 1983, pp. 492-493.
 8. Steven Zipperstein, *The Elusive Prophet: Ahad-Ha'am and the Origins of Zionism*, Berkeley, 1993, p. 18.
 9. *Proceedings of the Central Committee of Hovevey Zion ("Lovers of Zion")*, Paris, 1898, Department of Manuscripts and Archives of the Jewish National and University Library, Ms. Var. 325/248.
 10. Meyerson to Narcisse Leven, 13.10.1896, Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, JCA Archives.
 11. Y. Mayorek, "Emile Meyerson and the Initial Involvement of the Jewish Colonization Association in Eretz Israel" [in Hebrew], *Cathedra*, 62, (December 1991), p.75.
 12. Meyerson to Haffkine, 29.8.1902, CZA, A408.
 13. *Ibid*, pp.3-4.
 14. *Ibid*, p. 5.
 15. *Ibid*, pp. 5-6.

Copyright © 1999; Historical and Genealogical Research in Israel. All rights reserved.