

WHAT AHAD HA'AM SAW AND HERZL MISSED—AND VICE VERSA

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The unresolved rivalry between the great Zionist thinker and the great Zionist strategist still shapes the contending outlooks of many 21st-century Jews.

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About the author: Hillel Halkin's books include *Yehuda Halevi*, *Across the Sabbath River*, *Melisande: What are Dreams?* (a novel), *Jabotinsky: A Life* (2014), and, most recently, [*After One-Hundred-and-Twenty*](#) (Princeton).

This essay is the fifth in a series by Hillel Halkin on seminal Hebrew writers of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The first four dealt with the novelists [Joseph Perl](#), [Avraham Mapu](#), and [Peretz Smolenskin](#) and the poet [Yehudah Leib Gordon](#).

It was to prove the most contentious Jewish book review of the century, although the century was but three years old when it appeared. Published in December 1902 in the prestigious Hebrew monthly *Hashiloah*, Ahad Ha'am's long, caustic attack on Theodor Herzl's Zionist-utopian novel

Altneuland touched off a furor that did not die down until the following summer, when an even fiercer controversy broke out at the Sixth Zionist Congress.

Ahad Ha'am, "One of the People"—the pen name of *Hashiloah*'s founder and first editor Asher Ginzberg—had emerged in the 1890s as a foremost Hebrew essayist and Zionist thinker. Born in the Ukraine in 1856 and a resident of Odessa since the mid-1880s, he was at once a highly private and public figure, a naturally aloof man whose intellectual distinction and sense of Jewish mission propelled him to a prominence that he both basked in and felt uncomfortable with. Not by chance was the only formal group he ever belonged to—he was the main force behind its creation—a shadowy society, called B'nei Moshe or "the Sons of Moses," which sought, like a secret lodge, to work behind the scenes for the cultural education of East European Jewry. Short-



A portrait of Ahad Ha'am taken from a postcard.
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lived and ineffective, the group expressed his preference for being a discreet mover of events rather than an active participant in them. Just “one of the people,” whether chosen ironically or not, was clearly not what he thought he was.

His Zionism was elitist, too. In an early essay written in 1889, “This Is Not the Way,” he argued against the idea of Palestine as a destination for the Jewish masses. The Love of Zion movement, he maintained, had erred by calling for speedy, large-scale settlement in the Land of Israel; hoping to compete with America for the swelling wave of Jewish emigrants from Eastern Europe, it had made unrealistic promises of profitable homesteads in new agricultural colonies, lucrative businesses opportunities, thriving Jewish villages in which to raise one’s family, and so on, that could lead only to disillusionment and re-emigration. Zionism, the essay maintained, would not succeed by appealing to the lowest common denominators of human motivation. Only by invoking an idealism dedicated to national revival rather than personal benefit could it attract settlers capable of withstanding the difficulties of Palestinian life. The numbers might be small, but they would be a base that could be built on.

In 1891 and 1893, Ahad Ha’am made a pair of fact-finding trips to Palestine and published a two-part report on them entitled “The Truth from the Land of Israel.” Devoted to the decade-old Jewish colonization enterprise, it confirmed the worst predictions of “This Is Not the Way.” Wherever he looked, Ahad Ha’am wrote, he had found mismanagement, wasted opportunity, stagnation, and demoralization. The country was poor and without resources. Its tiny community of Zionist immigrants had ceased to grow. Their agricultural colonies, now supported by the Parisian baron Edmond de Rothschild and administered by his officials, were economic failures, their one-crop policy of grape growing misguided, their farmers subsisting on philanthropy and the exploitation of cheap Arab labor, their French overseers autocratic and incompetent—and with all that, Jewish land purchases had led to rampant speculation. The Turkish government, ill-disposed toward Zionism, was corrupt and dysfunctional; exorbitant taxes and cumbersome bureaucratic regulations made commercial ventures in the cities impractical. Jewish schools taught their children either in European languages that did nothing to foster Jewish culture or else in a Hebrew so crude that “the young pupil can only chafe in the artificial chains of the speech imposed on him.” Without a thorough overhaul of its structure, no significant expansion of the Yishuv, the Zionist community of Palestine, was thinkable, much less desirable.

“The Truth from the Land of Israel” was a harsh critique. It did not, however, cause Ahad Ha’am to consider himself less of a Zionist. Pessimism, he declared in several essays published in the first half of the 1890s, was justified only if one thought quantitatively. In sheer numbers, Palestine could never vie with America or have the economic capacity to absorb more than a small percentage of the world’s millions of Jews. To the extent that the problem of these millions was anti-Semitism and the poverty induced by it, Palestine could be of no help to them. They would have to cope in the Diaspora, where most of them would go on living.

Yet if the “problem of the Jews” could not be alleviated by Zionism, the “problem of Jewishness” was something else. This had to do not with anti-Semitism but with assimilation, which was

most severe where anti-Semitism was weakest. In an increasingly secular age, Jewish religious tradition was losing its hold; with nothing to replace it, Jews, if not forced back on themselves by Gentile rejection, were rapidly forsaking their cultural and national identity. In Western Europe, the process had gone far; among America's East-European Jewish immigrants, and in parts of Eastern Europe itself, it was already making serious inroads. In the absence of a counterforce, it would continue to spread, devastating the Jewish people from within.

In an increasingly secular age, Jewish religious tradition was losing its hold, with nothing to replace it. This was where Palestine could matter.

And this was where Palestine could matter. Suppose, wrote Ahad Ha'am in an 1892 essay dedicated to the memory of the Russian Zionist Leon Pinsker, an association of high-minded Jews were to take responsibility for the reorganization of Palestinian Jewry. Suppose it were to reform Jewish agriculture, weaning it from its dependence on philanthropy, viticulture (itself a semi-philanthropic enterprise based on the export of inferior Palestinian wines to Jewish markets), and Arab labor while turning its villagers into hard-working tillers of the soil. Suppose it were to rebuild Jewish education, bringing the best pedagogues and Hebrew teachers to raise a new generation of knowledgeable, patriotic, fluently Hebrew-speaking youth. Suppose it were to found a Hebrew press and publishing industry to meet this generation's intellectual and cultural needs. And suppose word were to spread in the Diaspora that there were

Hebrew farmers, real farmers, who plowed, sowed, and reaped with their own hands and came home at night from their fields to read and study. . . . [W]ould it not be natural for many prominent Jews to come to the Land of Israel to see this wonder? And surely, when they came and saw it and the association's other achievements, they would feel a deep love for their ancestral land and their brothers living in it, whose wholesome life has raised esteem for Jews throughout the world, [so that] many of them would soon become Lovers of Zion themselves and visit the Land of Israel with their families each time they went abroad on vacation.

One is reminded of Joseph Perl's [fictional Jewish peasants](#) in the Crimea, the incarnation of the Haskalah ideal of healthy Jewish minds in healthy bodies, with the addition that now they are also a tourist attraction. But Ahad Ha'am saw farther than this:

Moreover, suppose the Jewish youth educated in the association's schools travels to the world's enlightened countries (for the association will send them to the best universities for advanced study)—and behold another wonder! Educated young Jews who are not Germans, French, or anything but sons and daughters of the Land of Israel communicating with one another in the Hebrew language of yore! . . . Seeing the honor accorded it, the language of Scripture, by their Christian friends, Jews, too, will recognize that their ancient tongue has come gloriously back to life. Many will become aware of its grace and beauty and long to learn it themselves. And when they do, they will have teachers, Hebrew speakers from Palestine, whom they will prefer to

instructors from their own countries, just as one would always rather be taught by a native speaker.

In a word, Palestinian Jews could create a model Jewish society whose influence would radiate to the Diaspora, giving it a sense of pride and purpose. This could not happen, Ahad Ha'am wrote, overnight. The association would not act impetuously or in the expectation of quick results. It would guide events slowly and without attempted shortcuts, building the Yishuv immigrant by immigrant and colony by colony until

after several generations, it will have achieved its goal: the creation in the Land of Israel of a national spiritual center for Jewishness that is loved by the entire Jewish people and binds it together—a center of knowledge, of Torah study, of the Hebrew language and its literature, of the purest of bodies and souls: a true miniature of the Jewish people as it should be.

The resemblance between Ahad Ha'am's high-minded Zionist directorate and the B'nei Moshe, still active when he wrote these words, hardly calls for comment; most likely he conceived of the B'nei Moshe as such a body's founding nucleus. Yet its very elitism, based on a vision of Palestine as a source of inspiration for the world's Jews rather than a physical home for them, had a broad psychological appeal. It addressed an oppressive concern that "The Truth from the Land of Israel" had helped aggravate; for if Zionist colonization in Palestine was proceeding at a snail's pace at the same time that Jewish emigration elsewhere was growing by leaps and bounds, what could possibly be the point of it? And how call oneself a Lover of Zion if deterred from living in Zion by its hardship?

Here was a comforting answer. Numbers were not important. Palestine did not require large amounts of settlers; indeed, more than could be productively absorbed would only be harmful. To the Land of Israel would come "first Jewishness and then Jews." Zionism needed to be patient. And if his readers complained, "But how long the way is and how far-off the realization of the hope!," Ahad Ha'am could only answer:

Yes, my brothers. The shore we yearn for is exceedingly far off. But a people that has wandered for thousands of years will not find the longest road too long.

I. A Rival Appears

Though it had its critics like Moshe Leib Lilienblum, who considered it defeatist, Ahad Ha'am's brand of Zionism had, by the mid-1890s, gained wide acceptance in Eastern Europe. His trips to Palestine gave it credibility. Others argued about the country. *He* had been there. He had traveled widely, investigated, collected opinions and statistics, talked to the experts. He had a first-hand knowledge on which he brought to bear a sober realism and long-range vision that made him the leading Zionist intellectual of the age.

And then, in 1896, came Theodor Herzl and his book *The Jewish State*.

The book was actually written in 1895, the year of the first Dreyfus trial, which Herzl covered as the Paris correspondent of the mass-circulation Vienna *Neue Freie Presse*; its German publication, which he went ahead with despite the pleas of those who read it in manuscript and thought it deranged, took place early the following year. By any rational standard of the times, it *was* deranged. A slim volume, hardly more than a brochure, it consisted of two parts: a shorter one explaining why, faced with worsening anti-Semitism that would inevitably spread to the rest of the world, the Jews of Europe needed a country of their own, and a longer one detailing how a mass exodus to such a land could be carried out swiftly.

Those who read Herzl's *The Jewish State* in manuscript thought it deranged. By any rational standard of the times, it *was* deranged.

It was this second part that must have struck its readers as particularly bizarre. A call for a Jewish state, coming from a successful Viennese journalist and playwright with no known Jewish interests, could be written off as a mere eccentricity. A step-by-step plan for achieving this goal by means of international diplomatic agreements, well-capitalized stock companies, vast land purchases, coordinated networks of emigrant-bearing trains and steamships, and modern cities rising from the wilderness in record time to house the new arrivals could hardly be deemed the product of a rational mind.

It was Herzl's good luck, it might have seemed at the time, that *The Jewish State* went largely unnoticed when published. This was so not only in Germany and Austria, where the very idea of Zionism was a curiosity, but in Jewish Eastern Europe as well, where Zionism was an everyday subject of discussion. Although it has been said that Herzl appeared in the skies of East European Jewry with a sudden, comet-like brilliance, that was hardly the case. A cursory review of the Hebrew press suggests that there was almost no interest in him until the weeks preceding the Zionist congress that he organized to take place in the late summer of 1897. Even when his existence was acknowledged, as when an article of his, translated from an Austrian weekly, appeared in the Warsaw Hebrew daily *Hatsefirah*, it was with no sense of the role he was about to play. Introducing the article, *Hatsefirah*'s editor Naḥum Sokolov described Herzl, for the benefit of readers who had never heard of him, as an author, "well-known in the literary world of Vienna," whose ideas, though "their practicality can be challenged," deserved a hearing.

Indeed, even as excitement mounted with the approach of the congress's opening session on August 28, East European Zionists, most of them disciples of Ahad Ha'am, remained skeptical. The congress's advance notices struck them as pretentious. Herzl himself was an upstart, a Jew with no real knowledge of Judaism and a latecomer to a movement that had been promoting colonization in Palestine for years. He demonstrated the difference between the Yiddish-speaking and Hebrew-reading Jews of Europe's East, with their inborn rootedness in their people's traditions and culture, and the deracinated Jews of the West, who needed anti-Semitism to remind them of who they were.

Worse yet, Herzl belittled the colonies that had been established by the Lover of Zion movement in Palestine as a needless provocation of the Turks, from whom he hoped to buy or lease the entire country by paying off, with the help of Jewish financiers, Turkey's large international debt—and if this proved impossible, a reading of *The Jewish State* revealed, he was willing to consider a territory in Argentina, where the Bavarian-born banker and railroad magnate Baron Maurice de Hirsch had been trying, with little success, to settle Jews since the early 1890s. Nor did Herzl believe that the language of the Jewish state could be Hebrew, in which there was no way, as he had put it, of even asking for a railroad ticket.

To Ahad Ha'am's followers, Herzl's whole scheme seemed like a parody, a wild exaggeration of the kind of fantasy-ridden Zionism that Ahad Ha'am had decried. The "Easterners" had no need of it. "To listen to [Herzl's] advocates," declared an editorial in the August 8 number of the St. Petersburg Hebrew paper *Hamelitz*, "one would think that a genius had suddenly discovered that the Jewish people was still alive without knowing it and needed to be informed of the fact . . . and of there being a land called Israel in which it might be rejuvenated." Writing in the same publication, the future literary historian Yosef Klausner felt called upon to sound a note of caution against the ridicule of Herzl that was almost as common among Zionists in the East as among anti-Zionist Jews in the West. "We can," he said,

oppose Herzl's approach and are obliged to, as every Lover of Zion who attends the Basel congress is free to do, if we think it will harm the steady growth of Jewish settlement in Palestine. . . . It may be that Herzl's political-diplomatic Zionism is dangerous, and that the Jewish people must be warned of this. But to laugh? One doesn't dismiss ideas like [Herzl's] with witticisms.

And yet when the congress convened in Basel, Herzl, with all the theatricality he had learned from the Viennese stage, brought it off with grand flair. From the huge blue-and-white flag draped over the entrance of the casino that had been rented for the occasion to the tails and white ties that the delegates were enjoined to wear, all was calculated to impress with its festivity. "The opening of the congress was most magnificent," wrote the author Re'uven Asher Braudes, reporting for the Hebrew weekly *Hamagid*. One-hundred-ninety-two delegates attended from a large number of countries, plus numerous representatives of the Jewish and European press and literary dignitaries like Ahad Ha'am. Herzl's opening speech was "a fine one." Following it came a keynote address on the condition of world Jewry by the celebrated German Jewish author Max Nordau, a recent convert to Zionism, "every word of which struck home like an arrow." Never before had there been such an international assembly of the Jewish people.

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In his final dispatch, Braudes, though insisting that "we [East European Zionists] know far better than the congress's organizers what Jewishness is," confessed:

The congress was like a wonderful dream, a fabulous, divine spectacle. . . . It was an extraordinary event, not because it arrived at any great decisions, witnessed any great debates, or produced any great insights, but in and of itself. . . . It is enough for our people to know that it now has something to hope for, that it still has the will to live, that it has taken its future into its own hands.

Herzl's own speech was indeed a masterpiece of measured phrasing in which he made an effort to placate the East European delegates, of whose views he was by now well aware, without retreating from his own positions. In a rhetorical gesture to both the Ahad Ha'amists and the congress's religiously Orthodox delegates, he declared that Zionism must be "a return to Jewishness even before there is a return to the Jewish land," and he paid tribute to the Love of Zion colonies as deserving the "sincere gratitude" of the Jewish people for being "the first but not the last word of Zionism"—the success of which depended on the massive settlement that would follow Turkey's and the world's recognition of the Jewish right to Palestine.

The Easterners were won over by Herzl's presence. ("He is tall and handsome," wrote Re'uven Brainin in *Hamelitz*, "the Hebrew type at its purest, with a rare charm, an Oriental grace, and two dark eyes, burning like coals, that lend majesty to his mild and pleasant mien.") They were swept away, too, by the congress's atmosphere of Jewish solidarity. "Every one of us [who was at the congress]," reported Brainin, "feels that it lasted more than three days. It was as if we had known each other for ages. If we were to measure our lives by thoughts and feelings, we lived in Basel for years."

Everyone, that is, but Ahad Ha'am. He had felt in Basel, he wrote after returning to Odessa, "like a mourner at a wedding." True, the call for a "national answer to the Jewish question" had been sounded loudly and clearly. Herzl, with whom he had had a brief meeting, was personally impressive. Had the congress convened for a single, symbolic day and dispersed, all hearts "brimming with the sacredness of the moment," there would be no cause to complain. Alas, however, this moment was wasted. Two more days were spent wrangling in committees about how Zionism's program should be formulated, about how the world should be asked to recognize it, about the Jewish bank that would underwrite it, and so on, as if these were imminent realities rather than the pipedreams they would prove to be.

And even if they were more than dreams—even if, Ahad Ha'am postulated, Herzl's Jewish state were to come into being—what purpose could it serve without the Jewish content that Herzl had no interest in? What stood to be gained by the existence of one more small country that would be tossed back and forth between stronger neighbors like a ball, surviving by "the guiles of diplomacy" and groveling before the powers of the day? "There is no way," Ahad Ha'am wrote, "in which an ancient people that has been a light unto the nations can, in recompense for all of its tribulations, make do with such a bare minimum."

II. In Herzl's Shadow

There was undoubtedly, as the Israeli historian Yosi Goldstein has observed in writing about Ahad Ha'am and Herzl, an element of injured pride and even vanity in all of this. Ahad Ha'am had been regarded by many, and regarded himself, as Zionism's foremost representative. Now, he was in the shadow of a man who not only was his opposite in many respects but who had no appreciation of who he was.

It rankled. Although there were more Zionist congresses to come, one every year, he did not attend them. Many of his followers did attend and created an informal opposition to Herzl that called itself the Democratic Faction; one of its leaders was the young Chaim Weizmann. Herzl paid it scant attention. He was frantically engaged in these years in the "guiles of diplomacy" that Ahad Ha'am had mocked: traveling repeatedly to Constantinople to tempt the Sultan with promises of money that did not exist, vainly cajoling wealthy Jews to make it available, pulling every string to get audiences with the German Kaiser that led nowhere, entering into negotiations with the British for a Jewish protectorate in the Sinai peninsula.

"The great task," Herzl had written soon after the First Congress, "is to set people in motion." His great fear was that what had been set in motion by him would stutter and stall. A poker player with the weakest hand at the table, he could only hope to win by bluffing. Ahad Ha'am, who never considered Herzl anything but an illusionist, did not fail to comment on this, often referring to him, with a tinge of sarcasm, as "the Zionist leader." Still, he restrained himself until the publication of *Altneuland*.

Herzl had been thinking of writing such a fictional work for years. Its title of "Old New Land" was taken from the Altneuschul or "Old New Synagogue" in Prague, originally the Neuschul when built in the 13th century. Yet the novel itself was inspired by his own *The Jewish State*. Wishing to rebut the critics, Zionists and anti-Zionists alike, who called that book's blueprint for Jewish statehood far-fetched, he set out to show how it could be used to construct a society more advanced than any envisioned by Ahad Ha'am, one capable of accommodating the millions that Ahad Ha'am thought Palestine had no room for.

Altneuland begins in 1902 with a prologue. Its main character, Friedrich Löwenberg, is a twenty-three-year-old Viennese Jew rejected in love, disdainful of the bourgeois Jewish society to which the woman who has spurned him belongs, and suffering from a bad case of Weltschmerz. Answering a newspaper ad for a "cultured and despairing young man willing to try a last experiment with his life," he meets one Mr. Kingscourt, né Königshoff, a wealthy German aristocrat who has left Europe for America and then, fed up with civilization, bought a small island in the South Pacific on which he intends to live out his life. He is looking for a companion with whom to share it and Friedrich, feeling he has nothing to lose, agrees to join him.

The novel now jumps to 1922. Friedrich and Kingscourt, having spent a happy two decades on their island, sail their yacht back to Europe, curious to see what has happened there in their absence. Passing through the Suez Canal, they decide to pay a visit to Palestine—a country that, when they stopped there on their outward-bound voyage, was poor and neglected. To their

amazement, it has been transformed. Splendid cities with broad boulevards have replaced its wretched towns; green fields worked by tractors carpet former swamps and barren hills; trains and automobiles whiz across distances once traversed by donkeys and camels; power lines, their electricity produced by canal-borne water plunging from the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea, run to the horizons. There are silent, speedy trams, large, modern department stores, attractive apartment buildings, even theaters and opera houses. Friedrich and Kingscourt cannot believe their eyes.

It is all, they learn, the work of the New Society for the Colonization of Palestine, the organization created by the Zionist movement upon chartering the country from the Turks soon after the two men sailed for the South Pacific. Financed by London bankers assured of a reasonable return on their investment, the organization has managed, swiftly and efficiently, to transfer a majority of Europe's Jews, eager to escape anti-Semitism, to their new homeland. A board of experts has used its know-how to dispose of the emigrants' property at its true value, purchase large tracts of land from Palestine's Arabs without driving up prices, make the necessary mass travel arrangements, put in place the needed infrastructure before the new arrivals disembark, and provide them with immediate housing and work.

Successfully created with the help of the latest technology, the New Society, as *Altneuland* is also known, is run on the basis of the most progressive political and economic principles. It is a full democracy in which universal suffrage prevails and the civil and religious rights of non-Jewish minorities are scrupulously respected. (Herzl chose to illustrate this by means of a lengthy scene, set at a town meeting in the village of Neudorf, at which, following an appeal by *Altneuland*'s president David Litwak, the villagers vote overwhelmingly to reject the platform of the nationalist rabble-rouser Dr. Geyer, who would exclude non-Jews from the New Society.) Major enterprises are cooperatives run by their workers. Free education and health care are provided to all. Palestine has become a country any European would be envious of.

Herzl's Jewish utopia, Ahad Ha'am wrote, had nothing Jewish about it. It was simply a replica of Europe transplanted to the Middle East.

And precisely this, Ahad Ha'am wrote in his review of *Altneuland* in *Hashiloah*, was proof of everything he had said about Herzl all along. "The cat is out of the bag!" he began as if having caught Herzl red-handed. "The Zionist leader has finally revealed his conception of the Messianic Age that is around the corner." Herzl's Jewish utopia had nothing Jewish about it. It was simply a replica of Europe—Europe at its best, to be sure, but what of it?—transplanted to the Middle East.

One by one, Ahad Ha'am enumerated the New Society's features and institutions. Its better-educated inhabitants speak German; its common folk, Yiddish. Its theaters and opera houses (to which, Ahad Ha'am noted with glee, the *Altneulanders* have to wear white gloves à la Paris) perform in these languages, too, as well as in French, English, Italian, and Spanish—everything but Hebrew. If the many newspapers and magazine on the newsstands offer any Jewish content,

“we haven’t been informed what it is.” The curriculum of *Altneuland*’s schools, in which Hebrew is not the medium of instruction, includes sciences, European languages, and athletics, but not, it would seem, Jewish history or culture. The country’s inhabitants pride themselves more on their good relations with their Muslim and Christian neighbors than on their own traditions. Although there is a “Jewish Academy” modeled on the Académie Française, its stated goal is to encourage work that will “benefit the human race”; Jews, presumably, as members of this race, will benefit, too. “And why is it called the Jewish Academy?” inquired Ahad Ha’am before answering his own question. “Perhaps because only Jews would treat their own language and literature in such a fashion.”

Indeed, Ahad Ha’am asked, if one imagined “the Zionist leader” heading a movement not for the return of the world’s Jews to Palestine but for that of America’s Negroes to Africa, and writing a novel about it,

how would a Negro *Altneuland* be any different from a Zionist one? I believe it no exaggeration to say that a few superficial changes would suffice to Africanize [Herzl’s] book completely. [His belief in] imitating others without the slightest originality; going to all lengths to avoid anything smacking of national chauvinism, even if this means obliterating a people’s nationality, language, literature, and spiritual propensities; making oneself small to show how great, even revoltingly so, is one’s tolerance . . . all is a monkey-like aping of others with no show of national distinctiveness. The spirit of slavery-within-freedom, the spirit of the Western European Diaspora, is everywhere. . . .

A Jewish renaissance that would truly be Jewish cannot be created overnight by stock companies and cooperatives. A historic ideal demands historical development, and historical development takes time.

“Slavery Within Freedom” was the title of an early essay of Ahad Ha’am’s in which he had contrasted the Jews of Eastern Europe, who were inwardly free to be themselves despite outward oppression, with their emancipated West European counterparts, who slavishly internalized the culture of their emancipators. Herzl was a mental and spiritual slave: this was the bottom line of the review of *Altneuland* in *Hashiloah*. There was no need to read between the lines.

III. A Fight Breaks Out

Simultaneously with its appearance in *Hashiloah*, Ahad Ha’am’s review ran in the Russian Jewish periodical *Voskhod* and was sent by him to the German Jewish monthly *Ost und West* with a request to translate and publish it. *Ost und West* did so, submitting an advance copy to Herzl for comment.

Herzl was stung badly. From his point of view, he had made no small effort to stress Altneuland's Jewish character. He had had Friedrich and Kingscourt attend a grand Passover seder; experience a Sabbath in Jerusalem whose peaceful mood affected them "like a spell"; visit that city's main synagogue, a facsimile of the ancient Temple, whose worshipers "intoned Hebrew words [that had] aroused nostalgic echoes for hundreds of years in the breasts of a people dispersed all over the globe"; hear from their guides about the New Society's adoption of the biblical Jubilee Year, in which all debtors are forgiven their debts, as a unique instrument of social justice; and—himself accused of being a false messiah!—see a play at the National Theater about the messianic pretender Shabbetai Tzvi. That Ahad Ha'am thought all of this empty window-dressing was something he could not understand. Fearing the damage the review might inflict on him and the movement he led, yet reluctant to be dragged into an undignified quarrel, he asked Nordau, his closest Zionist colleague and confidant, to answer for him.

Nordau was happy to comply. A cultural and political iconoclast of a conservative bent, he liked nothing better than a literary brawl. He began this one, in an article published in the Zionist weekly *Die Welt* in March 1903, with a point-by-point rebuttal of Ahad Ha'am's review and then waded in. Ahad Ha'am, he wrote, was a nationalist fanatic. He was unable to shake off "the chains of the ghetto." The only freedom he recognized was that *of* the ghetto. He thought toleration of non-Jews was unbecoming for a Jewish state. He mocked Herzl for taking opera houses and white gloves from Europe because all he himself wished to take was the Inquisition. Although he thought Zionism should proceed slowly, there was nothing slow about the spread of anti-Semitism. What it would ultimately lead to if Jews did nothing about it, "any fool can guess."

To Max Nordau, Herzl's colleague and confidant, Ahad Ha'am was a nationalist fanatic, unable to shake off "the chains of the ghetto."

In brief, Nordau wrote, Ahad Ha'am was

no Zionist. He is the opposite of one. It's a cheap trick to attack "political Zionism" as if there were some other, mysterious kind of Zionism, his own, to believe in. Zionism *must* be political. A Zionism that isn't political and doesn't strive to create a homeland for that part of the Jewish people that won't or can't adjust to life in the Diaspora is not Zionism at all, and the [true] illusionist is he who uses the word in a sense other than that of the Basel program. We have no choice but to make this clear to the Jews of Russia who *are* good Zionists, or at least want to be, and who don't realize the game Ahad Ha'am is playing.

Ahad Ha'am's review in *Hashiloah* had sent ripples running through the Zionist world. Now, Nordau's article caused a tidal wave. In newspapers, periodicals, open letters, and manifestos, in Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, and German, Ahad Ha'am's supporters rallied to his side. Nordau had penned "a disgusting broadside." He had produced "a tirade full of hatred." His article was "an assault on freedom of thought" and on "a man and writer, admired by us all, in the vanguard of

our national movement.” His display of bile was all he had to offer. “Is it possible,” asked Yosef Klausner, “for a snake not to bite?”

But Nordau had just as many defenders. “Herzl builds and you tear down,” declared the Zionist intellectual Shmaryahu Levin in an open letter to Ahad Ha’am; *Altneuland* was a novel, not a political tract, and should not be judged as one. Ahad Ha’am, wrote the German Zionist Sammy Gronemann, was a habitual fault-finder who, “face to face with Achilles, would see only his heel”; he had written his review “to destroy political Zionism.” Nordau, said a letter to *Hamelitz*, had spoken harshly only because “it takes heavy artillery to blow up a fortress of wrong ideas.” It was Ahad Ha’am, not Herzl, who was “the dreamer of dreams,” declared the Russian Zionist Hillel Zlatopolsky. Ahad Ha’am was deliberately splitting the Zionist movement and Nordau was right to denounce him.

There were dozens of published pros and cons. Not a few treated the clash as one between East and West European Jewry. “How much Western insolence,” wrote Klausner, “there is in Nordau’s lies—insolence toward the Jews of the East and insolence toward Hebrew literature, its authors and readers alike!” One of these authors, Mikhah Yosef Berdichevsky, though himself a severe critic of Ahad Ha’am, declared: “It is not just the profanation of Ahad Ha’am’s name that angers us [East Europeans]. . . . The disgraceful affront is to the bulk and mainstay of our people, us Hebrews [of the East].” And on the other side of the ledger, Herzl’s close associate Max Mandelstamm wrote to him: “Pay no attention to the howls of Ahad Ha’am and all the half-Asian yeshiva types. . . . The Russian swamp has come to life and its frogs are croaking.”

Yet it was far from just a battle between East and West. Mandelstamm was himself a Russian Jew, as were Levin, Zlatopolsky, and others who took Nordau’s side, and Nordau received public declarations of support from Zionist societies in Minsk, Bialystok, Rovno, Lodz, and Odessa. Conversely, there were prominent West European Zionists like Marcus Ehrenpreis, Benjamin Sagel, Martin Buber, Alfred Nossig, Davis Trietsch, and David Neumark who backed Ahad Ha’am and signed statements on his behalf. Ehrenpreis, who strove more than most participants in the debate to see both sides of it, rightly called it a case of “one [legitimate] point of view against another.” Nor were the two necessarily irreconcilable. “Perhaps,” he wrote, “victory will go in the end to a third, synthetic view that will unite cultural and political Zionism together.” Meanwhile, however, “there are clearly different schools of thought within the Zionist movement, the proponents of each of which have the right to defend it as best they can.”

IV. The Hebrew Imperative

It was natural for Ahad Ha’am, in writing about *Altneuland*, to deplore the absence of Hebrew in Herzl’s Jewish state. Like any Jewishly educated East European, he had grown up with Hebrew as a second language—and as a first one when it came to the prayers and rituals of the Jewish day and year, the biblical and rabbinic texts he had studied, the secular literature he first was

exposed to, and his own choice of a medium to write in. Hebrew was a basic component of his Jewish identity. A Jewish renaissance in Palestine without it was inconceivable to him.

It was true that Ahad Ha'am did not use Hebrew for oral communication with his surroundings, in which he conversed in Yiddish or Russian. For this he was taken to task in a pro-Nordau article by Eliezer Ben-Yehudah, the apostle of the spoken-Hebrew revival, who accused him of hypocrisy; yet he was no different in this respect from any of his Hebrew-writing contemporaries. There were even those of them like Lilienblum who did not think that the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language in Palestine was a *sine qua non* for Zionism's success. In the first decade of the 1900s, no one could be sure that such a revival was possible; attempts to bring it about were still largely limited to the schoolroom, from which it was not clear how far it would spread. And yet Lilienblum, too, took it for granted that Hebrew would be, at the very least, Palestinian Jewry's medium of literary culture. No other language could take its place.

And Ahad Ha'am had thought more deeply about language than had Lilienblum or other Hebrew writers of the times. A man of great intellectual curiosity, he was familiar with the writings of linguists like the American William Dwight Whitney and the Frenchman Ferdinand Brunot and had read widely in the social sciences, which were dominated by the neo-Darwinism most famously represented by Herbert Spencer. Ahad Ha'am knew Spencer's work well; it held human societies to be the product of slow, generally unconscious developments in the course of which, much as in the evolution of a biological species, their component parts grew more complex and mutually well-adapted. Every society was an interlocking system of such parts, none of which could be altered without affecting all the others—and there was no better example of this than a language, whose speakers, no matter how heterogeneous, shared a commonality of concepts and values.

Language functioned, Ahad Ha'am wrote in an essay on the subject, like a physiological organism, processing experience on an unconscious level and making it available on a conscious one. It did so for peoples no less than for individuals, the difference being that "the individual mind has no choice but to submit to the linguistic usages of its times," so that, "even if it idiosyncratically strays from the [linguistic] norm, it will be called back to it by a multiplicity of counter-examples," whereas "the mind of a people, though similarly governed by inherited rules, is not so bound by them that it cannot develop new ones." A phonetic shift, new word, or altered grammatical form was comparable to a biological mutation. It originated with a single person and rarely went further; only if it served some collective need or purpose was it passed on and disseminated. The evolution of a language was the sum of such successful mutations, every language being a repository of a people's "national spirit" and a record of its development. A people that lost its language did not necessarily lose its literature, which could be translated. It did, though, lose the living nerve cells of its memory. The Hebrew-less inhabitants of Herzl's *Altneuland* were amnesiacs.

The Hebrew of his time, Ahad Ha'am thought, compulsively kept quoting its own past; it lacked the habits of clarity and directness that were a feature of everyday speech.

The anomaly of Hebrew, Ahad Ha'am argued, was that it had ceased to evolve organically when it had stopped being spoken in the first centuries of the Common Era. As a purely written language it had continued to change, just as did, say, medieval Latin, but it no longer did so in successive developmental stages. All of its stages continued to co-exist on the written page and to be available as models, blocking its "evolutionary path"; a linguistic atavism such as the reversion to biblical diction by a writer like [Avraham Mapu](#) could never have taken place in the presence of a regulating spoken standard. Although Herzl was right about railroad tickets, this was not the problem. A word for "ticket" could easily be invented or adapted from another word (as indeed it was when *kartis*, an Aramaic term in the Talmud for a writ or bill of entitlement, was given that meaning in the early 20th century); Haskalah Hebrew had many such neologisms. The problem was that, quite apart from missing terminology, Hebrew had yet to evolve into a truly modern language. It was not yet flexible and supple enough; its grammar and lexicon were a confusion of different periods; it compulsively kept quoting its own past; its purists resisted the positive influence of more developed European tongues; it lacked the habits of clarity and directness that were a feature of everyday speech.

As a writer and editor, Ahad Ha'am was determined to teach it such habits. He was not operating alone: 19th-century Hebrew, particularly in its daily and weekly press, had already performed much of the work, gradually adding new vocabulary, pruning away archaisms, and adopting a more European-like syntax. [Yehudah Leib Gordon's editorials](#) in *Hamelitz* were a good example of this. Ahad Ha'am simply went farther in the same direction. The Hebrew of his later essays set a new standard of functional fluency.

Take the opening paragraph of "Moses," written in 1904:

When I listen to scholars debate the effect of the "great men" of history on human life, some saying they are history's makers and the common people plastic material in their hands, and others saying, no, the people is the moving force and its great men in every generation are the inevitable products of its circumstances; when I listen to such arguments, I think: how little do the savants see past the tips of their noses! Isn't it obvious that the true great men in history, those who have remained active influences throughout the ages, have not done so as real beings who existed in a specific time and place? No historical great man has not had his spiritual portrait painted by his people's imagination differently from the reality, and it is this imaginary composition, the work of a folk pursuing its needs and propensities rather than some actual person whose brief life was not at all what it was taken to be by others that constitutes the true great man who has continued to make himself felt, sometimes for thousands of years,

This is not simple prose. It is syntactically complex and expresses a complex thought. There is not a word in it, however, that is inexact or redundant. It says what it has to say in clear language, without frills or rhetorical flourishes. It is purged of every trace of biblical diction and grammar, and of the self-preening allusions to the classical texts of tradition that were an age-old feature of

Hebrew literary style. It un-self-consciously borrows European words like *historiyah*, “history,” and *histori*, “historical,” for which it was the Haskalah practice to search for often awkward Hebrew equivalents. The translator of it does not have to strain to make it sound modern. It is modern.

V. The Prophet and the Popularizer

On the issue of the “great men” of history, Ahad Ha'am's disagreeing “savants” could be personified as Thomas Carlyle, who wrote in his 1840 *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History* that “In all epochs of the world's history we shall find the great man to have been the indispensable savior of his epoch,” and Spencer, who stated in his 1860 *The Study of Sociology*, with Carlyle in mind, that “the genesis of a great man depends on the long series of complex influences which has produced the race in which he appears. . . . Before he can remake his society, his society must make him.”

Neither Carlyle nor Spencer would have put the dispute in terms as starkly opposed as those to which Ahad Ha'am reduced it; both presumably would have agreed with William James's judgment that “both factors are essential to change; the community stagnates without the impulse of the individual; the impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community.” But Ahad Ha'am's point was that the argument itself was misconceived, historical heroes being indistinguishable from their communities. The great men of the past are remembered only as the myths they have become, without which they would have faded into oblivion—and these myths are the work not only of their own generation but of all the generations that came afterward. If archaeologists were to unearth proof that the historical figure of Moses had never existed, it would not make the slightest difference, since Moses the folk-creation would continue to exist.

Who is this Moses? He is, Ahad Ha'am writes, the archetype and greatest example of the uniquely Jewish concept of the prophet. The prophet is not a hero in the ordinary sense: he takes up arms in no wars and wins no battles as do the heroes of other peoples. (Although this is not strictly true of the Moses of the Bible, Ahad Ha'am was right that his military role there is not stressed.) He fights not against enemies but for “truth and justice,” which are ultimately one and the same, for “what is justice but truth in action?” When Moses, as a young man in Egypt, kills an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, he does so not as an Israelite patriot but as someone with a passion for fairness who instinctively sides with the weak. This is also why he comes to the aid of Jethro's daughters at the well upon arriving in Midian, even though they are not Hebrews. “Why should that matter?” Ahad Ha'am asks. “The prophet makes no distinction among persons apart from the distinction between right and wrong. [Moses] saw shepherds aggressively taking advantage of defenseless women and [as the Bible says] ‘stood up and rescued them and watered their flock.’”

Moses, Ahad Ha'am wrote, was “a man of truth.” But to get the Israelites in Egypt to believe in him, he would have to be, as he said to God, “a man of words.”

Moses' decision to return to Egypt and liberate his fellow Israelites after years of living quietly in Midian expresses the same inner impulse. Yes, he is commanded to do this by God in his vision of the burning bush; but were he not unconsciously looking for a moral cause—did not an inner voice tell him “Go! Fight! That's what you were created for!”—he would not have heard God's summons. For the first time, he knows where to find “the road that will take him on his life's quest.” One thing alone deters him: he is, Ahad Ha'am writes, “a man of truth,” and to get the Israelites in Egypt to believe in him, he will have to be, as he says to God, “a man of words”—that is, of rhetorical slogans such as a truth-teller must not use. As tempting as it would be to use cheap tricks and legerdemain to achieve his end, “the prophet in him rebels against the offensive thought.”

Luckily, there is a solution. Moses has a verbally facile brother, a priest and not a prophet, who will popularize his ideas. And so, with Aaron's help, he returns to Egypt and leads Israel out of it; Pharaoh and his army are destroyed, and he is now the leader of a free people whom he will take to the Promised Land. Little does he realize that the most difficult part still lies ahead and that “while the masters have ceased to be masters, the slaves are still slaves.” Satisfied that he has taught the people at Sinai that their God is a moral being whom they must painstakingly learn to emulate, he discovers on his descent from the mountain that Aaron has betrayed him, sacrificing to the golden calf of populist emotions that clamor for instant gratification. For a moment, he is on the verge of giving up. Remembering, though, that “he is a prophet, a teacher and an educator,” he comforts himself that the process will be a long one. If he perseveres, he will yet succeed.

But then comes the episode of the twelve spies. Sent to scout the Land of Israel, they return with the truth—and it is more than anyone can bear. The disillusionment is great. “A people sets out on its own to win a homeland and create a new national life there that will be a model for others—and a single negative report demoralizes it to the point of despair!” Now, Moses realizes that his hope of educating this people in his lifetime is a vain one. It will take a generation or more in the wilderness for such an evolution to take place. Haste can only lead to disaster, as it does when the Israelites, the Bible tells us, seeking to bolster their shattered morale, press ahead against their enemies in the desert despite Moses' admonition and suffer a crushing military defeat. One must proceed step-by-step, even if this means that Moses himself will die before entering the Promised Land. Indeed, he must die, because once the people enters this land,

a new time begins in which prophecy is no more—a time of compromises and concessions such as belong by the nature of things to the conflicts of life, whose reality can never match the prophet's vision. . . . Let others come and make these compromises while doing the best and accomplishing the most they can. Whether

this is more or whether it is less, it will be neither what the prophet wished to achieve nor how he wished to achieve it.

VI. Ahad Ha'am's Self-Portrait

“Moses” is one of Ahad Ha'am's finest essays. It shows him as Hebrew literature's first true master of the essay form, at which he honed his skills while editing *Hashiloah*. The monthly was run by him with a firmer and more professional hand than Hebrew periodicals, thankful for whatever material they were able to scrape together, had been before him, and the standards he imposed on himself in the many pieces he wrote for it were even higher than those demanded of others. They had beginnings that stated general truths or posed clear questions; middles that developed and discussed their themes without repeating themselves or wandering off in digressions; ends that tied it all together. These were not things taken for granted in the Hebrew press of his day.

His essays were never personal in the sense of openly bringing his own life into them. One learns almost nothing of it from reading them. And yet if one knows something about it, its traces are often visible. Any reader familiar with Ahad Ha'am's career would have realized that “Moses” was also a self-portrait. The founder of the B'nei Moshe was clearly writing about himself: the truth-teller who would not pander to the public he hoped his disciples would win over in his name; the lonely campaigner for ideals too lofty to be popular; the realist who warned against exaggerated expectations from the Land of Israel; the Zionist who insisted that generations of Jews would remain in the Diaspora. If an age's prophets were the intellectuals who proclaimed the truths others hid from, it was he, he felt, and not the misleadingly Moses-like figure of Herzl, who was entitled to call himself one.

Ahad Ha'am felt that he, and not the misleadingly Moses-like figure of Herzl, was the one entitled to call himself a prophet.

He was reticent about his own religious beliefs, being loath to embroil himself in disputes with either upholders or detractors of Tradition, and “Moses” is no exception to this. Still, not without justification did Nordau cuttingly refer to him in his *Die Welt* attack as a “secular rabbi,” and this secularism lies close to the surface of “Moses.” The essay's rarely-mentioned God is but an exteriorization of Moses' conscience, just as a careful reading of Ahad Ha'am's essays leads to the conclusion that the entirety of Judaism was for him a projection of the Jewish “national spirit.” It was this spirit's phylogenetically evolved form, just as predatory habits and tawny camouflage are the lion's, and a ruminant stomach and swiftness in flight the antelope's.

And yet one can search Ahad Ha'am's essays in vain for any taxonomy of the Jewish “national spirit” or explanation of what makes it unique. His infrequent discussions of the subject remain

on the level of generalizations that sometimes descend to out-and-out tautologies. Thus, in an 1899 essay on “National Morality,” he observed that

In distinguishing between right and wrong, we find many differences among peoples: what one considers good another considers evil, and what is a moral duty worth sacrificing one’s life for in one case is a matter of indifference in another. . . . And if this is true of all advanced nations, which are not that removed from each other in circumstance, experience, and character, how much truer it must be of the Jews, who have always been [as stated by the Bible] “a people that dwelleth apart,” different from all others in the remarkable course of their development. It would be impossible for them not to have a national morality of their own based on their spiritual inclinations, past history, and present condition.

The Jews, in short, have a distinct “national morality” because . . . they must have it. Of what this unique code consists, the essay gives only one example. This involves Herzl and Nordau, each of whom, curiously, had written a play (Herzl’s, *The New Ghetto*, in 1895, Nordau’s, *Dr. Kuhn*, in 1898) ending with the death in a duel of a sympathetically portrayed Jewish protagonist. Both Herzl’s Jacob Samuel and Nordau’s Leo Kuhn are assimilated Jews who nevertheless have a sense of Jewish pride, and both are killed when they bravely but rashly challenge anti-Semitic insults. “I hardly need say,” Ahad Ha’am wrote,

how opposed such behavior is to the basics of our national morality—not just to the commandments of Judaism, but to our core sense of right and wrong. Apart from a few writers and intellectuals, the peoples of Europe have yet to free themselves of the crude concept that a slight to one’s honor must be expunged with blood. Yet the true Jew . . . knows very well that a culture that is thousands of years old elevates him far above such primitivism, which is a remnant of more ignorant and cruel ages. . . . He will answer [his insulter] with a single contemptuous look and go his way.

In point of fact, Ahad Ha’am was being unfair. Neither Herzl nor Nordau was holding his protagonist up as an example for Jews to follow; both were depicting the tragic situation of a Jew who feels compelled by a Christian society he wishes to be part of to throw away a life that it will not let him live with dignity. But Ahad Ha’am had little appreciation of imaginative writing, which he rarely published in *Hashiloah*, and no aptitude for reading it. He saw only what he took to be its moral, which was in this case that Herzl and Nordau had not the slightest inkling of what true Jewishness was. He was convinced of this before the *Altneuland* affair; convinced even more so in its wake; and convinced most of all by the Uganda debate at the Sixth Zionist Congress in Basel in the summer of 1903.

VII. The Africa Decision

A sense of crisis hung over the Sixth Congress long before it convened. The unprecedentedly bloody pogrom in Kishinev in April 1903 with its dozens of murdered Jews had demonstrated the potential lethality of European anti-Semitism and the urgency of finding a more reliable refuge from it than America, whose gates would not stay open forever.

It was no secret that Herzl, who had gotten nowhere in his negotiations over Palestine with the Turks, had also been conducting talks with the British for a territory on the northern coast of the Sinai Peninsula, in the vicinity of El-Arish. If successful, these would confront the Zionist movement with a fateful choice. Sinai was not Palestine; to opt for a Jewish state in it, warned the El-Arish plan's opponents, would mean taking the "Zion" out of Zionism. Not at all, argued the plan's supporters: British Sinai bordered on Turkish Palestine and Jewish colonization there would eventually spread across the frontier. Others simply shrugged. The dilemma, they believed, would vanish of its own accord when negotiations with the British went the way of negotiations with the Turks.

They did—but only regarding El-Arish. Herzl's opening address stunned the delegates. The Sinai plan had fallen through, but the British colonial office, which was looking for white settlers for its territories in East Africa, had made a counteroffer: a large area near Lake Victoria (which, though actually in northwest Kenya, Herzl seemed to think was in Uganda) that they were prepared to place at Zionism's disposal as a British protectorate. Although, Herzl told the delegates, he had yet to form a firm opinion of the matter, it was worth considering. No such offer had ever been made to the Jewish people before. He proposed sending an official Zionist delegation to the area in order to investigate its suitability, and he intended to introduce a resolution to that effect.

The congress was thrown into a turmoil. East Africa was thousands of miles from Palestine; there could be no spillover from one to the other. Even if the proposed resolution called only for a preliminary inquiry, a vote for it meant officially conceding that Zionism was prepared to abandon Palestine under the right circumstances, while a vote against it meant defying Herzl and very likely causing him to resign. The delegates were bitterly split. The East Europeans, led by Weizmann and the Democratic Faction, were heavily in the "no" camp. Most of the Westerners were for voting "yes." The alignment of forces was not unlike that of the *Altneuland* affair.

Uganda could perhaps accommodate the Jews, declared one ally of Ahad Ha'am, but never Jewishness. Jewishness without Jews, Nordau mocked, was mere "spiritualism."

Herzl spoke to the congress once, assuring it that East Africa was not a substitute for Palestine and that it was "merely an expedient for settlement purposes." Nordau spoke twice, passionately asking the delegates to support Herzl. The Jewish people, he said, was being offered a *Nachtsyl*, a shelter for the night, by the greatest power on earth. It would be irresponsible to refuse even to consider it. One delegate, echoing Ahad Ha'am (Nordau was referring to Meir Dizengoff, the future mayor of Tel Aviv), had declared that the problem was not the Jews, which Uganda could perhaps accommodate, but Jewishness, which it could not. Jewishness without Jews, Nordau

mocked, was “spiritualism.” Yet another speaker, dismissing the damage a “no” vote would do, promised, “Our wonderful Herzl will find a way to deal with it.” Yes, Nordau retorted sarcastically: “First smash the china and then let our wonderful Herzl put it back together.” It couldn’t be done.

The Uganda resolution was put to a vote on the fourth day of the congress. Two-hundred-ninety-five delegates voted in favor, 176 voted against, and 143 abstained. The “naysayers” walked out of the congress hall and assembled in a separate room, where they sat on the floor like mourners on the Ninth of Av, the day commemorating the destruction of the Temple. Some wept. Sentiment was for seceding from the Zionist Organization. Only a last-minute intervention by Herzl, who rushed to the scene from the hotel room he had adjourned to, was able to persuade the group to return for the congress’s final sessions.

Ahad Ha’am was not present at the congress, the fifth in a row he had declined to attend. Like his followers who were there, he had no way of knowing that Herzl, shaken by the intensity of the debate and his inability to command an absolute majority, would die within a year and that a three-member delegation sent to East Africa would come back before then with a negative report. In an essay entitled “The Weepers” published in December 1903, Ahad Ha’am asserted that Herzl had shown his true colors; he had never cared about Palestine to begin with. And yet it was on the naysayers, his own followers who had betrayed him as Aaron had betrayed Moses, that he vented his greatest wrath. In Basel, they had sat and wept; but why hadn’t they heeded his warnings about Herzl all along? Why had they allowed themselves to be used by him? And why, especially, had they rejoined the congress after its vote? “From the very first,” he wrote, “they shut their eyes and did not want to see where they were going. . . . What else but weep can they now do—weep for the ruin in their souls and their incapacity ever to repair it?”

But though Herzl’s Zionist Organization was finished, “historical Zionism” was not. “For it, there is no need to worry. It can wait.” One day new forces would appear to fly “the eternal Zionist banner” once more. And if, Ahad Ha’am wrote,

some political wise man then arrives and suggests a shortcut to Zion, they will open the chronicles of our times to the page on Uganda in the chapter on “Political Zionism” and tell him, “Read!” . . . The way is long and the end must not be hastened.

VIII. What Ahad Ha’am Failed to Realize

Whether Herzl really thought it would be possible to make the enormous investment of time, money, and human lives needed to develop a Jewish colony in East Africa while continuing to press efforts to obtain Palestine is unclear. Surely, Ahad Ha’am and the naysayers at Basel were right that any serious East African project would have shouldered Palestine aside.

But Ahad Ha'am was also right that such a project could never have gotten off the ground. A Jewish colony in Africa would have meant no more to the Jewish public than did Baron de Hirsch's empty acres in Argentina. Palestine alone had the historical and emotional resonance capable of galvanizing Jewish emotions. Uganda was a straw Herzl clutched at, not a well-considered idea.

Above all, Ahad Ha'am was right that not even Palestine could be attractive without Hebrew as its language and medium of culture. Only Hebrew could unite Palestine's Jewish inhabitants, drawn from all over the world; make them feel the Jewish past was speaking through them; connect them to their people's deepest self. Palestine could indeed not compete with America. It had to be more than just a haven. Life in it was too hard for anyone not prepared to be, besides a refugee from anti-Semitism and a breadwinner for his family, a bearer of Jewish history. Herzl had failed to grasp this. He had believed that the bourgeois paradise of Altneuland would be enough to attract millions of Jews. He had imagined that such a paradise could be constructed in twenty years when 200 might not have been enough.

And yet a Jewish state *had* to be built quickly. Time was of the essence. This was what Ahad Ha'am failed to realize.

One can't say he had no sense of time. If anything, he had too much of it. He thought in terms of time's slow processes. He lacked an awareness of how time had sped up in the 19th century and would accelerate even more in the 20th, so that the Jewish people would have to run its fastest to keep up with it. Zionism, he thought, was in no hurry. In his criticisms of Herzl, he repeated this again and again. Here *he* was wrong.

Zionism, Ahad Ha'am thought, was in no hurry. In his criticisms of Herzl, he repeated this again and again. Here he was wrong.

Herzl, with his fascination with modern technology, understood how quickly the world was changing. Nordau understood it even better. In his best-selling 1892 book *Degeneration*, a critique of *fin-de-siècle* European decadence, he had written:

One epoch of history is unmistakably in its decline, and another is announcing its approach. There is a sound of rending in every tradition, and it is as though the morrow would not link itself with today. Things as they are totter and plunge. . . . Views that have hitherto governed minds are dead or driven hence like disenthroned kings, and for their inheritance, they that hold the titles and they that would usurp are locked in struggle. Meanwhile, interregnum in all its terrors prevails; there is confusion among the powers that be; the millions, robbed of their leaders, know not where to turn; the strong work their will; false prophets arise, and dominion is divided among those whose rod is the heavier because their time is short.

And even Nordau, then a man of forty-three, could not have predicted that within his lifetime—he died in 1923—Europe would be ravaged by a colossal war, most of its empires would be

toppled, and Palestine would pass into British hands. The world was about to be transformed utterly.

Ahad Ha'am was correct in saying of Herzl that he had nothing to show for the seven years in which he led the Zionist movement apart from that movement itself. He had managed to create a political organization that masses of Jews identified with, but that was all. Had he not done so, others probably would have. It might have taken another decade or two, but it would have happened.

But those one or two decades were crucial. They made all the difference. Had Herzl not created political Zionism in 1897, it would not have been in place to carry on after his death in 1904; had it not been in place in 1904, it could not have obtained the Balfour Declaration from the British in 1917; without the Balfour Declaration, there would have been no flow of Jewish immigrants to Palestine in the 1920s and 30s; with no Jewish immigration to Palestine in those years, Israel could not have been established in 1948; had it not been established then, Arab Palestine would have gained its independence and a Jewish state would no longer have been possible. If Zionism had acted on Ahad Ha'am's advice, such would have been the outcome.

Fortunately, too, Ahad Ha'am's followers returned to the Sixth Congress's final sessions. A walkout would have split the Zionist Organization, perhaps fatally, whereas remaining in it as an organized opposition to Herzl strengthened the democratic structure he had sought to give it. Democracy was not a concern of Ahad Ha'am's; although he thought it the intellectual's job to lead, he never, after the failure of the B'nei Moshe, grappled with the question of how ideas might be translated into realities. Herzl did. The Neudorf scene in *Altneuland*, however simplistic, is a description of leadership and democracy in action, and Herzl had sought from the beginning to conduct the Zionist Organization accordingly. While he trusted in his charisma to carry the day when necessary, he didn't shrink from putting it to the test of the ballot, and he encouraged the Uganda plan to be debated and voted on even though this meant running the risk of losing. It was the first time in Jewish history that a decision of national consequence had been made in such a manner.

The real winner of the Uganda debate was the precedent set for democratic process. It was one faithfully followed by Zionism in the decades to come, particularly after World War I, when the Zionist Organization, through its executive, became the de-facto governing body of Jewish Palestine. Political parties, with mass followings in both Palestine and the Diaspora, competed within it; hotly contested elections were held throughout the Jewish world; ruling coalitions were cobbled together at Zionist congresses—all on the principle of majority rule. If, as has often been commented on, Israel was one of the few countries to emerge from World War II and its aftermath as a genuine, stable democracy, this was not due to any ingrained Jewish propensity for democratic governance. It was a result of the education provided by pre-1948 Zionist politics, which Herzl initiated and Ahad Ha'am disdained. This, too, belongs to the balance sheet between them.

IX. Synthesis, or Truce?

In some respects, Marcus Ehrenpreis's hopes for a synthesis of cultural and political Zionism came to pass. With Uganda forgotten, Herzl gone, and Ahad Ha'am's role in Zionist discourse diminished, particularly after he ceased to be in close touch with his Zionist peers upon moving to London in 1908 (he was to remain there until 1922, when he moved to Tel Aviv, where he died in 1927), the polemical atmosphere temporarily vanished from Zionist life.

Hopes for a Turkish-granted charter for Palestine died permanently when the nationalist Young Turks seized power from the sultan in 1908, while at the same time, the Yishuv expanded as restrictions on Jewish immigration were eased and the failed Russian revolution of 1905 caused politically conscious young Russian Jews to give up on their country and look to Palestine for an outlet for their ideals. Pioneer *moshavim* and kibbutzim, the agricultural communes that soon would dominate Palestinian Jewish agriculture, sprang up; Tel Aviv launched its bid to become the world's first all-Jewish city; and Hebrew, a generation of native speakers having left the schoolroom for the street, took off. The Zionist Organization, both in Palestine and the Diaspora, concentrated on practical issues while putting Herzlian diplomacy behind it. Herzl's dream of a Jewish state remained and even loomed as a more realistic if distant possibility as the Palestinian Jewish community grew, but it no longer clashed in Zionist minds with Ahad Ha'am's gradualism.

Yet this truce—for this was all it really was—came to an end with World War I. Even while the war was under way, it was threatened by the debate over Ze'ev Jabotinsky's campaign for a Jewish Legion that would advance the Jewish claim to Palestine by fighting for it with the British against the German-backed Turks. Supported by some Zionists as a bold initiative, this was denounced by others as a dangerous reversion to Herzl's adventurism. (What would be the consequences, it was asked, if the Turks and Germans won the war or vented their anger on Zionism before losing?) And once the war was over and the period of the British Mandate commenced, the old differences flared up along a wide political front, pitting Jabotinsky and the Zionist right against Weizmann, David Ben-Gurion, and the Zionist left.

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Should the Zionist Organization's goals be quantitative and focus on bringing as many Jews to Palestine as quickly as possible, or qualitative and directed toward the construction of a model Palestinian Jewish society, a "miniature of the Jewish people as it should be"? Should the Yishuv's economic policies appeal to the materialistic motives of the Jewish masses or the Spartan values of an idealistic elite? Could Palestine realistically serve as a refuge from European anti-Semitism or was this too much to expect of it? Should Palestinian Jewry openly stress its hopes for Jewish statehood or play them down while slowly building up its forces on the ground?

By the early 1920s, these and related issues were out in the open. By the mid-1930s, they had brought the Yishuv to the verge of civil war.

Of course, this was no longer a war between Herzl and Ahad Ha'am. Yet it is striking, when one considers it, how Ahad Ha'am set the agenda not only for many of the Jewish assumptions and debates of his own times but for many of those of ours. His paradigm of a center in the Land of Israel serving as a source of strength for Diaspora communities that chose not to live in it; his understanding of Judaism, or Jewishness (significantly, he never linguistically distinguished between the two), as an organically evolving body of tradition and behavior selectively adapting to its environment; his view of Tradition as the creation of a “national spirit” deserving of being valued and preserved for its own sake even if not God-given; his belief in a secular Jewish moral mission—this interlocking conceptual framework, which, though not always intellectually rigorous, still shapes the outlook of many 21st-century Jews and their institutions, was given its first clear formulation by him.

And Herzl? One often wonders what this great man would think of the Jewish state that never would have existed without him. How one would like, one hundred years later, to see Friederich and Kingscourt pay it another visit!