Afterword

White gloves. This is the first concern Kingscourt and Friedrich have when they return to Palestine twenty years after their first visit there in Herzl's *Altneuland*. In the meantime the country has completely transformed and is now a thriving and modern Jewish state that boasts an opera house, the highest sign of civilized refinement in Herzl's bourgeois imagination.

Sarah glanced at the paper. "At the national theater tonight there is a biblical drama called *Moses*."

"A noble theme," remarked David.

"But too serious. There's *Shabbatai Zevi* at the opera. And at some of the popular theaters there are Yiddish farces. They are amusing, but not in very good taste. I should recommend the opera."

"Won't it be too late to get tickets?" asked Kingscourt. …

"I have had a box ever since the opera house was built" [David said and] began to draw on a pair of white gloves.

Gloves! White gloves! Neither Kingscourt nor Friedrich had any. In all the twenty years on their quiet Pacific island, they had no use for such fripperies. But now they were back in civilized society, and in the desperate predicament of accompanying ladies to the theater. One must behave like a civilized human being. Kingscourt asked whether they would pass a glove shop on their way to the opera.[1]

Herzl would have been tickled to know that, almost 120 years after his premature death in 1904, the Israeli Opera had commissioned a work based on his life, that tearful audiences gave that opera, *Theodor*, a standing ovation night after night, and that performances of the show were extended due to popular demand. Bracketed between the literary melodrama of *Altneuland* and the operatic melodrama about its writer's

[1] Herzl, *Altneuland*, book 2, ch. 5.

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life stretches a century in which Herzl's vision has materialized, although not as he imagined it.

Culturally speaking, the Jewish state Herzl had in mind was a copy of his Austria-Hungary, down to – well – white gloves. Only it wasn't particularly Jewish. Herzl's New Society was a reflection of his secular middle-class sensibilities and lacked denominational character, save for superficial exotica such as a Sanhedrin (a Jewish parliament or House of Lords based on ancient lore). The Jewish state that actually developed in the Eastern Mediterranean was a different creature, a highly original community that was far removed from Herzl's vision. If it was bourgeois, it tried to suppress those tendencies in the name of a passionate socialist nationalism.

The difference between vision and reality had nothing to do with the early death of Herzl, but with the Zionists who made his dream come true. One of the tragedies of Herzl's life was that the audience he initially had in mind, middle-class Jews like himself, who were frustrated by the glass ceiling imposed by antisemitism, were not interested in his message. They were too comfortable and too close to their goal to start everything from scratch in some half-savage country in the Middle East – German Jews moved to Palestine in the 1930s only after their life in Germany became unbearable.

The prophetic-looking Herzl was more popular with the impoverished and more traditional Jews of Eastern Europe. And since they had little to lose, some of them made the difficult trek to Palestine "to build and be built by it," in the words of one of their pioneering songs. And if they found Herzl's message appealing, they had a different state in mind, a Jewish state that was deeply informed by their traditional upbringing even as they rejected it. This was the secret to their success and, with the benefit of hindsight, the reason why their solution to the Jewish Problem actually worked.

It was a principle that came up again and again in all of the cultural realms Zionists innovated: in the language they reanimated and the accent they gave it; in the communal space they shaped and the houses they built; in the hard bodies they formed and the defiant spirit they adopted; in the festivals they renewed and those they made from scratch; in the art they created and in the music they wrote. Unlike Herzl's European copy, each of those realms was deeply informed by Jewish religion, by Jewish customs and practices, by Jewish history, and by Jewish mythology. They were all transformed by Zionists and received

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different interpretations, different shapes, different meanings. The initial value of those innovations resided in this very process, whereby an old civilization begat a new shape. Instead of looking for a pair of white gloves, the Zionists who built the Jewish state sewed a different garment altogether. It was an inspired dialectical move, a negation of the Jewish Diaspora and the creation of a new Jewish community that nevertheless incorporated much of the old, rejected culture into it.

But if the move was successful, the properties of the new Zionist compound it created were unstable and had the potential to break in problematic ways. One was away from Judaism, the other was back to it. Neither was envisioned by the early Zionists, who were aware of the tension between New and Jew but based their revolution on maintaining it.[2]

It is hard not to turn, once again, to "The Sermon," a short story by Haim Hazaz that questioned the relationship between Zionism and Judaism and offered a startling take on it.[3] "I'm not one to say what Zionism is," says Yudke, a shy Zionist settler, who asks to speak before a committee of his peers and goes on to give them an agitated lecture, continuing:

> I'm not the man for it, even though I've racked my brain and thought about it for a long time. But that's not important. … One thing is clear. Zionism is not a continuation; it is not medicine for an ailment. That's nonsense! It is uprooting and destruction, it's the opposite of what has been, it's the end. … It … is more than assimilationism, more even than communism. … Zionism, with a small group at its head, is the nucleus of a different people. … Please note that: not new or restored, but different. And if anyone doesn't agree, well, I'm very sorry, but either they're mistaken or they're deluding themselves. … I believe that this land of Israel is no longer Jewish. … Yes, it's a different Judaism, if you choose to fool yourselves and keep that name, but certainly not the same as survived for two thousand years, not at all the same.

Yudke is a self-fashioned pioneer, but his pride in the Zionist revolution and his contribution to it are tempered by his knowledge that

[2] For a book-length study on this tension see Yaacov Yadgar, *To Be a Jewish State: Zionism as the New Judaism*, New York University Press, 2024.

[3] Robert Alter, ed., *Modern Hebrew Literature*, trans. Ben Halpern, Behrman House, 1975, pp. 271-287.

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they have come at the expense of diasporic Jewish culture. Like all revolutionaries Zionists thought of their old world as a husk to be discarded, and they defined themselves against it in negative terms, even if it informed them. "This community is not continuing anything," Yudke tells his listeners, who are at first confused and annoyed by his diatribe but gradually become absorbed in his arguments.

> It is different, something entirely specific, almost not Jewish, practically not Jewish at all … We are ashamed to be called by the ordinary, customary Jewish names, but we are proud to name ourselves, say, Artzieli or Avnieli. Haimovitch, you will agree, that's a Jewish name, entirely too Jewish, but Avnieli – that's something else again, the devil knows what, but it has a strange sound, not Jewish at all, and so proud!

The Canaanites were one example of the split between an Israeli here and a Jewish there.

"The Sermon" ends inconclusively. It turns out that Yudke's lecture was only an introduction to something else he had in mind but never got to say. "And now to the main thing, to what I'm really after. I ask just a few more minutes of your patience … " he says, but trails off and the story ends. It's a clever structure that reflects the unfinished state of Zionism itself, which was only a few decades old when the story was published in 1942. But the points it makes about the nature of Zionism, about its relationship to its Jewish past, about the character of its Jewish present, and, more importantly, about the prospects of its Jewish future are compelling and have been borne out by time since then. I'll illustrate it with a personal anecdote. At the end of a lecture I gave about Israeli cinema to the local Jewish community of Cambridge, I was invited by one of the members of the audience to join the community for Sabbath services at the synagogue the next day. "But why would I come?" I replied without thinking: "I am Israeli."

The second – and opposite – direction has existed in Israel since the 1967 war, which released the Jewish ghosts of Zionism, ghosts that had been held in check until then by the balance between New and Jew. A lot has been written about it. An early and, as it turned out, prophetic account of it is a collection of essays Amos Oz published in 1982, *In the Land of Israel*. In the first essay Oz recounts a visit he made to the Jerusalem neighborhood where he grew up, which in the intervening years had been settled by orthodox Jewish families, who had turned

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the place into a "lively Jewish shtetl" teeming with yeshiva students, Hasidic Jews, and scores of Yiddish-speaking children.[4]

It reminds Oz of a casual conversation he once had with one of his professors, who spoke about Zionism as a passing episode, "a temporary burst of secularity, a historical and political fuss, that halakhic Judaism will soon overcome and swallow." When the professor said those words in the 1960s people dismissed it as a quip. "I still don't accept the prognosis," Oz writes, "but I cannot ignore it anymore. In the neighborhood where I grew up, the battle has been won. Zionism has been repelled from here, as if it had never existed. Maybe not repelled, but demoted to the status of a servant, someone who does the dirty work of removing garbage or maintaining the sewage system … that's what Zionism is good for in these neighborhoods."[5]

And this is just hardcore orthodox Jews. Oz also visits the religious nationalists, the settlers who live among Palestinians west of the Jordan River. One of them pays him a backhanded compliment by praising the members of the Second Aliyah – the founders of Labor Zionism – who "were very Jewish, even in their apostasy."[6] Unfortunately, he adds, the immigrants who followed them, socialists who joined the Labor movement, brought along cultural goods that were alien to Judaism: "Marxism, atheism, internationalism, etc." But all of it is gone now, the settler notes with satisfaction, "disintegrated, withered, destroyed, in Israel as in the rest of the world. The end of ideology has arrived, making it clear, once again, that in the absence of absolute values materialism and indifference soon fill the void."

"Maybe you should take another look at it," he tells Oz, "and think about your value system and how it withered and died. Without a kernel of belief in the everlasting, everything is doomed to fall apart. I am no missionary," he proclaims, "and I am not asking the prodigal sons to repent, but as someone with faith, idealism, and vision," he continues, "I can tell you that a spiritual life is not possible without some kind of inner faith." That's why Israel won in 1967, Oz is told by another confident settler. "Guns don't win wars! People do! Faith triumphs! The

[4] Amos Oz, "The Daily Blessings of God" (ברוך השם יום יום), in *In the Land of Israel*, Am Oved, 1982, p. 8.
[5] Ibid., p. 12.
[6] Amos Oz, "An Argument about Life and Death, Part 1," in *In the Land of Israel*, p. 94.

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Lord is victorious!"[7] Gone are the Maccabees and Bar Kokhba, whom Zionists worked hard to bring back from the far corners of Jewish history. God is apparently back, and he is going to help the Israelis as he had helped the Israelites before them.

A more contemporary chapter in the fight Zionism has been having with its religious ghosts, or demons, has been the widespread protests in the spring of 2023 against the most religious governing coalition Israel has ever seen, with Haredi, Mizrahi, and national-religious Jewish parties, a coalition that demonstrated its fundamentalist potential in its handling of the devastating Hamas attack in the fall of that year. But this was only a political expression of a process that began long before with the changes Oz recorded. It is tempting to say that the changes disturbed the balance between New and Jew by shrinking the New and expanding the Jew, by demanding a greater place for Jewishness in Israeli national life, whatever this means. Except that Haredi, Mizrahi, and national-religious Jews are very new phenomena, who are connected to the past as much, or as little, as Zionists were. Like all religious fundamentalist movements, they are reactions to a changing and confusing world. It would be more accurate to say that they have been trying to change the Zionist New, the innovations this book described, and replace them with their own inventions.

What becomes clearer with the passage of time is that the Zionist attempt to translate or fit Judaism into a national ideology did not work as well as its founders had hoped, or not in the way they had hoped. Judaism is a very old religion with a long and remarkable creative history. Taking it on, as Zionists tried to do, was a daring, mighty experiment, for sure. But perhaps it wasn't radical enough. Perhaps Zionists should have broken with their Jewish roots more decisively to get away from the pull of their overwhelming legacy. Y. H. Brenner said something about it at the very beginning of the Zionist experiment. "I would have erased the Jewish sense of chosenness from our books eagerly and gladly, all forms of it, this very day, scratched and erased those false nationalist phrases without leaving a trace. Because empty national pride and Jewish pretensions won't solve the Jews' problem, and national slogans are good for nothing."[8]

[7] Oz, "The Finger of God!" in ibid., pp. 50–51.

[8] Y. H. Brenner, *This and That* (מכאן ומכאן), second book, ch. 1, Ben Yehuda Project, available at https://benyehuda.org/read/523.

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Brenner was not blind to the charms of nationalism, which crop up occasionally in his otherwise stern work. His 1920s short story "Nerves" opens on an upbeat note: "A perfumelike smell, which came from the low clumps of acacia trees, or 'mimosas,' as some called them, scented the air of the small Jewish colony in southern Palestine."[9] Toward the end of the allegory about early twentieth-century Jewish homelessness, the mood picks up again when a family of Jewish migrants finally makes it to the Haifa shore. "It was beautiful then," says the narrator, "the great sea was ravishing, and the bay in Haifa doubly so. You see, I really did believe in beauty then … in the beauty of nature … of the cosmos … of something even higher than that." However, at the end of the story he overturns this short display of sentimentalism with one of the most cutting lines in modern Hebrew literature. Back at the small family farm where he works, he looks disapprovingly at his employers, as "they talked, yawned, drank coffee, and ate herring." The revolutionaries who came to Palestine to change the course of Jewish history created a shtetl instead. Not such a bad idea, perhaps, given his earlier comment about national pride and Jewish pretensions.

[9] Y. H. Brenner, "Nerves" (עצבים), Ben Yehuda Project, available at https://benyehuda.org/read/480.

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