Introduction

The Zionist claim to Palestine was based on a very old story: so old that it became a myth. And since the distance between the Jewish present and the Jewish past was vast, the wish to make Palestine a home for a modern Jewish nation called for creating that nation anew. It was an immense claim that required an equally immense innovation. Zionist ideology took it upon itself to do that, to recreate Jews as a modern nation by canceling the culture of the Jewish Diaspora and at the same time preserving parts of it in the spirit of New Hebraism. This book explains why and how this daring experiment came about.[1]

Zionist culture was not only premeditated, during its formative years it was continuously debated and closely monitored for ideological fitness. Two events bracket this formative period and define it historically: the meeting of the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897; and the establishment of the state of Israel fifty-one years later, in 1948. The Zionist Congress marks the initial push for the creation of a Jewish national community in Palestine–Eretz Israel. Its recognition by the international community as the state of Israel in 1948 marks the end of that period.

Cultural engineering is not unique to Zionism. Modern nationalism is based on the ideological molding of human groups into distinct communities. Zionism was simply an intensive example of a change that began in the modern era in Europe, whence it spread to the rest of the world, often by force. The violence that usually accompanies nationalism gave rise to Zionism first and foremost because of the difficult

[1] On the singularity of this experiment see the political philosopher Eyal Chowers, who credits it to a unique moment in Jewish history, a moment of temporal crisis, as he calls it, that can serve "as a springboard for reflection on the temporal imaginations of modernity" more generally. See the introduction to his book, *The Political Philosophy of Zionism: Trading Jewish Words for a Hebraic Land*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

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conditions the national idea created for European Jews: a condition commonly referred to as the Jewish Problem.

The Jewish Problem

Europe's so-called Jewish Problem intensified during the nineteenth century following changes to the legal and civil status of Jews at the time. With the spread of liberalism after the French Revolution and Napoleon's campaigns, European society opened up to its minoritized Jews, who until then had been excluded from full participation in it. One by one, European societies began to admit Jews as equal members into the various nation-states that took shape on the continent. However, while there was increasing willingness to include Jews as part of various national communities, the growing familiarity with them in Western, Central, and finally in Eastern Europe also bred a new kind of contempt. Unlike the former resentment toward Jews, which was mostly religious in nature, the Age of Reason saw the development of a resentment that was couched in pseudo-scientific terminology, an antipathy based on alleged racial differences between Jewish and Christian Europeans.

The new antagonism toward Jews was shaped by four major revolutions, which came to define European modernity during the nineteenth century: the secular revolution, the national revolution, the scientific revolution, and the gender revolution. All four gave rise to what came to be known as antisemitism. The secular revolution made the old religious antagonism toward Jews obsolete. The creation of the nation-state rebranded Jews as pariahs, an ultimate Other. The scientific revolution provided a rational framework for identifying Jewish difference. The gendering of the European bourgeoisie and the creation of the nuclear family as a way to ensure the stability of the new national community was another defining argument for singling out Jews. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, then, many Jews found themselves increasingly isolated within the new ethnic nation-states of Europe – isolated as a minority whose difference became progressively more problematic in various ways and to various degrees, depending on time and location.

Labeling Jews, especially Jewish men, as effeminate came to represent many of the prejudices against them. The label had a lasting influence on the formation and development of Zionism later. The pejorative

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meaning of the epithet was based on the longstanding bias against women, a prejudice that shaped the modern European middle class as well with its division into men, who work outside the home, and women, who stay inside. The contrasting ideal of a traditional Jewish society, which encouraged men to study while women worked to support them, even if it wasn't widely practiced, painted Jewish men as passive and effeminate. If we add to this the fact that few Jewish men engaged in traditionally masculine professions before the modern era – in the military, in politics, and in farming – and the legally subordinate status of Jews since late antiquity, we get a general image of Jews as passive, weak, and powerless.

The revolutionary idea of Zionism was to accept this power dynamic but to make it work for Jews, not against them. Since getting over these negative associations in Europe seemed impossible, Zionists suggested doing it by establishing a Jewish state outside the continent, in what they and fellow Europeans regarded as the Jewish ancestral land, the Land of Israel. By mimicking European non-Jewish culture, especially the assertive or manly sides of nationalism, Zionists hoped to shake off associations of passivity and effeminacy and prove the fitness of Jews, as individuals and as a community. They believed that the establishment of a sovereign state would prove the agency of Jews and their right to join other nations as equals on the world stage.

It is worth noting that Zionism was such an unusual solution for the problems Jews faced in modern times that it was never supported by a majority of them, either in the past or in the present. When European Jews found themselves increasingly displaced in a continent crowded by a growing number of new nations, many of them left. Between the 1880s and 1920s close to 3 million Jews left Europe. The majority headed to North America. As for millions of other European migrants at the time, financial and political security were the major reasons for moving. Ideology was a minor consideration for most migrants, Jews and non-Jews alike. The number of Jews who went to Palestine increased only after the United States imposed immigration quotas in 1924. Even today, the majority of the world's Jews reside outside the state of Israel.

At the same time, from shortly after its establishment in 1948 Israel came to represent world Jewry, for Jews and non-Jews alike. International politics and military skill certainly played important roles in this transformation. But what this book suggests is that the

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cultural revolution of Zionism was at least as important for turning the ancient Jewish nation into a modern national community. By creating a distinctive new Jewish culture in Palestine, Zionists solved one of the most persistent challenges Jews faced in modernity, except that instead of an individual solution, such as assimilation or migration, Zionism came up with a communal program that turned it into a leading force in twentieth-century Jewish civilization. Politics was crucial in making sure Zionism survived, but it was culture that gave it a distinct shape and a specific meaning.

This book goes back to the first fifty years of Zionism and looks at the ideological crucible in which Israeli culture was forged. It traces the sources of Zionist culture, the premises that helped to create it, and the great passion that secured its success. But in doing so, the book also reflects on the unraveling of the Zionist vision today, the vision of a secular Jewish nation and of a unitary Jewish people, and the legacy of the violence that shaped it.

Most of the cultural innovations Zionists developed were reactions to various difficulties Jews met in their attempts to assimilate into a secular and increasingly nationalist Europe, where they eventually became pariahs. Again, the genius of Theodor Herzl as the founder of political Zionism was to turn this weakness into strength by suggesting that Jews establish a country of their own. Only in Palestine, claimed Herzl, would Jews become real Germans – that is, equal members in the (inter)national order.

In creating a modern Jewish nation in Palestine, early Zionists were inspired by many of the cultural sensibilities that were at play in the new nations of Europe during their formative years, values that were adapted to the realities of Palestine but included reworked elements from traditional Jewish culture at the same time. This book looks at six of those innovations, which became the core of the new Jewish culture in Palestine and later Israel.

- The first is language and literature, the attempt to turn book Hebrew, a language of devotion and law, into the language of a modern Hebrew literature and a modern Jewish life.
- The second is the creation of new space, farms, and towns that would embody Jewish sovereignty and the socialist values of early Zionism.
- The third is the creation of muscular Jews, the reshaping of diasporic Jews into strong and independent Jewish farmers and soldiers.

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- The fourth is the creation of a festival calendar that enshrined many of these innovations by emphasizing the ancient agricultural elements of Jewish festivals and the glory of the Jewish military past.
- The fifth is the creation of new Jewish aesthetic sensibilities and the development of a distinctly Jewish art.
- The sixth is the creation of nationally distinct music that infused Western music with Arab tunes and traditional Jewish ritual music.

The book looks closely at these innovations; it traces their origins and examines the transformations they went through under a passionate national ideology. In doing so, it highlights the central role of culture in modern nation formation and suggests how the kind of culture Zionists created early on – fiercely patriotic, defiant, and proud – has had a decisive influence on the development of the state of Israel and the directions it took after its establishment.

* * *

A few words on some of the unresolved issues that continue to complicate discussions about Zionism. The first is the complex relationship between Zionism and colonialism and the discourse of power it has engendered. Both have made it increasingly difficult to speak about Zionism without provoking extreme reactions. For the Jews of Europe, colonization began after the Enlightenment with the changes they accepted in order to integrate more easily into a European society that always thought of them as different. To shed their perception as Others, many Jews adopted new languages, clothing, customs, and tastes. It was not an easy transformation, but the Jews who chose it did so because of the reward it promised: the reward of becoming Europeans, or, as we would put it today, becoming white. This act of self-colonization predated the arrival of Zionists in Palestine, where tensions between West and East, origin and mimicry continue to occupy Israeli society to this very day.

This is partly why Zionism paid little attention to the inhabitants of the land they settled, the Arabs of Palestine, despite early and urgent calls to do so. Yitzhak Epstein warned his fellow Zionists about it as early as 1907. Epstein came to Palestine in 1886 and witnessed the high-handed way in which Jews who bought land in Palestine drove away Arab tenant farmers who had lived on that land for generations. "We seem to have forgotten one small thing," Epstein told his fellow Zionists in an essay he titled "An Unresolved Question" (שאלה נעלמה), "that

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there is another people in the land we desire, a people that had been living on it for hundreds of years and have no plans of leaving."[2] Most Zionists were too absorbed in their own revolution and too focused on Europe to heed such calls, and all but ignored the Arabs of Palestine.

Another issue is the role of women in a socialist movement that claimed to be egalitarian but in actuality replicated traditional gender roles and continued to marginalize women. In many ways this was exacerbated by the masculine anxiety Zionism inherited from a European nationalism that usually cast women in supporting roles.

Yet another issue is the role of non-Ashkenazi or non-European Jews in the formation of Zionism. As a national movement, Zionism originated in Europe in response to a set of challenges that were unique to Jews there and as a solution for these challenges. Non-Ashkenazi Jews related to Zionism differently and began subscribing to it later because they lived otherwise. As a result, relatively few of them were involved in the formation of the movement in ways that were compounded by the differences between West and East.

A last point worth remembering is the vast difference in the condition of Jews at both ends of the twentieth century. At the beginning of the 1900s Jews were at the bottom of the power hierarchy in Europe as a community, especially in the eastern parts of the continent, where most of them lived. The Holocaust was a devastating example of this power dynamic. By the end of the century Jews had gained significant power in the state of Israel and in the United States, where most of them now live. Although early Zionists could not have imagined this enormous change, Zionism was devised in the hope of bringing it about. Any consideration of the movement needs to take this difference into account.

Finally, many of the issues this book raises have been studied in depth elsewhere. It is not meant to replace any of those valuable studies. Instead, it brings them together in a singular combination that highlights the intensity of the cultural revolution Zionists staged, a revolution so fervent that it altered the course of Jewish history and set in motion one of the most enduring transformations in a century crowded with radical changes.

[2] For the essay see https://benyehuda.org/read/38385.

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