

# **the forerunners of modern zionism**

How and why did Zionism change from a passive notion to an active ideology during the nineteenth century? What was the situation for Jews in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century preventing them from promoting mass migration to Palestine?

Although it has been a precondition of Jewish consciousness to believe that the emergence of a Modern political Zionist movement can be attributed to the rampant anti-Semitism suffered by the European Jews, this does not provide an adequate explanation. The entire history of the Jews can be defined by the way in which they suffered persecution under the oppressive hands of others, proving that anti-Semitism was not a phenomenon unique to the Jews of the nineteenth century. Thus, an exploration of the transformation of the Jewish world in lieu of the invention of the modern world as we know it is imperative to the understanding of the development of Zionism from a passive consciousness and yearning to the emergence of the first political Zionist writings marking the beginning of an active ideological movement advocating mass immigration to Eretz Israel.

The nineteenth century was a dynamic climate in European politics. The Enlightenment, a Western movement celebrating man's rationality, centrality, and equality, began in France in the last decades of the eighteenth century; however it was not until the nineteenth century that grants of emancipation proliferated across Europe. With the emancipation of German Jewry by 1871 every European country except Russia had emancipated its Jews, and the face of "Jewish identity" was challenged. For centuries the Jews of Europe were locked in their ghettos and shtetls, insulated from outside influences by rampant anti-Semitism. However, with emancipation came the breaking down of barriers both imprisoning and protecting whole Jewish communities, and when given the opportunity, the Jews impetuously rushed to the conquest of pleasures of secular society from which they had been cut off for so many centuries. For the first time Jews began to gain prominence in many areas of wider cultural endeavor. From 1835-1914 there was a great flourishing of Jewish literary and culture. Thus, the nineteenth century is regarded in history as the best century the Jews had ever known since the destruction of the Temple.

In lieu of the relative position, advancing status and seemingly growing tolerance towards and inclusion of the Jews in the nineteenth century it can be seen as paradoxical that it was this century that saw the birth and rise of modern Zionism. However with the emancipation and

secular opportunity of the Jews came a new 'Jewish problem'. Jews were now faced with the difficulty of defining and identifying themselves within the parameters of the burgeoning secular and nationalist ideologies. The Emancipation and the Enlightenment encouraged society to free itself from the ties of religious faith, and turn the matter of religion into the private affair of the individual. Having the opportunity to attend newly formed state secular schools based on general citizenship and not religious affiliation required Jews to negotiate certain religious aspects and forced them to make hundreds of small choices and compromises- whether or not to attend school on Shabbat, if so, whether to write or not? In a search for answers to deal with the new problems of Judaism from the influence of modernity and secularization, the Jewish people sought different answers. Jews of western Europe who sought to embrace secular life and discard the burdens of their Jewish tradition formed a reform or secularized sect of Judaism and became known as the "Maskilim". Decades later when Eastern Europe was emancipated from the rule of the Tsars and began to feel the burden of modernity, retreated back unto themselves and sought refuge in the extreme religious group known as "Hasidism", which elevated Torah above all else.

Thus the process of modernization and fragmentation between 1750 and 1850 successfully divided a linguistically and religiously united people into one of many religious sects and language clusters. By 1850 the majority of Jews in Eastern Europe still spoke Yiddish. Jews elsewhere spoke German, French, Hungarian, English, and increasingly, Polish and Russian. In 1750 almost all European Jews practiced traditional Judaism. By 1850 the majority of Jews in Western and central Europe did not, and Jews in Eastern Europe had become divided into Hasidim, opponents of Hasidism, and secularized Jews, whose numbers were growing.

Equally challenging to the face of Judaism was the corresponding rise of nationalism in European society. Most of European Jewry was then in the east of the continent where many nations were now trying to find their identity. Jews were thus forced to discern their own position amongst this nationalist surge. In an effort of self-determination and search for self-identity the Jews embarked on the process of "Haskalah" or Jewish enlightenment. The development of Hebrew as a new and modern vernacular and literature was the first step in the journey to try and provide a modern answer to the question of national identity.

The development of the first Zionist writings emerged within this historical and political context. Zionism took from the historical past its language and its ties to Eretz Israel and re-evaluated and recognized from the contemporary reality, the need for a new self-determination which in the post-Emancipation world cannot be satisfied with an exclusively religious definition.

During the beginning of the nineteenth century sentiment was aroused by rumors that the messianic era was at hand. Unlike religious scholars who preceded these figures, Yehuda Hai Alkalai of former Yugoslavia and Zvi Hirsh Kalischer of Posen and Thorn, were not only influenced by Talmudic and Biblical law but were inspired by the nationalist fervor of Europe that was creating new nation-states. This, combined with the unfolding of the emancipation process led them to believe that the “redemption will begin by awakening support among the philanthropists and y...the gathering of some of the scattered of Israel to the Holy Land”.<sup>1</sup>

Both Kalischer and Alkalai published works explaining their ideas and encouraging Jews to have national aspirations of independence. In the 1840's both men endeavored to spread their beliefs and enlist support from the Jewish groups and leading Jewish personalities of the time. In 1836, Rabbi Kalischer appealed to Anselm Rothschild to purchase the Land of Israel, or at the very least the Temple Mount. In 1843, Rabbi Alkalai published *Minchat Yehuda* (Yehuda's offering) in which he elaborates on the need for human initiatives, which will hurry the coming of the redemption. Alkalai called for the introduction of the tithe for financing settlement, for the achievement of international recognition of Jewish Eretz Israel, for the restoration of the assembly of elders as a Jewish parliament, for the revival of Hebrew (particularly spoken Hebrew), for Jewish agriculture, and for a Jewish army.

Despite their considerable efforts including the suggestion of practical programs, their influence was limited. Alkali and Kalischer's notions based on “religious redemption”, did not appeal to the Jews who were embedded in the assimilation process of western Europe. Nor did they gain support from their orthodox religious followers, many of whom believed the political nature of their plight to be a potentially “dangerous aberration from the true faith”<sup>2</sup> during a time which shook Jewish identity at its core. Thus, as a result of the conflicting values of the Jewish people resulting from the emancipation the “earliest stirrings of Zionism (were) stillborn”<sup>3</sup>

With Zionism's new entry to the world in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century came the adoption of new “tactics and techniques, in the hope of exploiting the contemporary colonial expansion and national stirrings of Europe.”<sup>4</sup> Pinsker, Hess and Lilienblum were three of the influential Zionist thinkers who emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century whose motivation, audience and actions were completely unlike that of the Religious Zionist thinkers who preceded them. They were

---

<sup>1</sup> “Seeking Zion”, by Rabbi Z.H Kalischer 1862 in A. Hertzberg (ed.) *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader*, New York: Atheneum, 1984

Hertzberg

<sup>2</sup> S. Avineri, *The making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981) p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* pg 33

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 37

products of 'general' European education and secular academic success who adopted and manipulated values and opportunities presented by notions of nationalism, romanticism, emancipation, secularism and the national renaissance of the peoples of Europe, to form an active ideology. Imbued with the current ideas of the European intelligentsia, these men were challenged by new definitions of nationalist identity, and were motivated to embark on a quest to acquire "self-respect in a society which had uprooted them from their traditional, religious background and had not provided them and their likes with adequate answers for this quest."<sup>5</sup>

German Jew and socialist comrade of Karl Marx- Moses Hess was the first "enlightened Jew" to write of the modern idea of Jewish national revival, based on the ideas of social justice, and to call for the establishment of an active political Zionist movement and of a Jewish socialist commonwealth in Palestine. In his book *Rome and Jerusalem; The Last National Question*, published in 1862, Hess was one of the first Jewish thinkers to hypothesize that emancipation and secularization would ultimately exacerbate anti-Semitism in Europe. Furthermore, Hess was the first to speak not only of Judaism in national terms but of a new racial anti-Judaism (modern anti-Semitism). Hess proposed that "when political conditions shape themselves as to permit the organization of a Jewish state, this beginning will express itself in the founding of Jewish colonies in the land of their ancestors."<sup>6</sup> With the wavering political climate and the controversial position of the Jews, he could not conceive that a European power would oppose the Jewish plight for nationalism. He concluded that the only solution to the Jewish problem was the establishment of a national Jewish society managed by a Jewish proletariat.

Hess however did recognize that the Zionist movement would confront many obstacles. The fundamental obstacle being a difficulty in 'reaching' the Jews who were now a religiously, spiritually and nationally divided people. Thus, it has been suggested that Hess "came too early in the history of Jewish emancipation to lead a post-assimilation recoil back to Jewish group solidarity."<sup>7</sup> Although his synthesis of socialism and Jewish nationalism would later become an integral part of the Labor Zionist movement, at the time his ideas were published the prosperity of European Jewry lessened the appeal of his work.

The pogroms in southern Russia in 1881 deeply stirred public opinion in Western Europe and America and marked the beginning of a new era in modern Jewish history. They came as a painful shock to those emancipated and assimilated Jews who believed the insidious prejudices of the Dark Ages to have passed forever. Thus, it reawakened the feeling of Jewish solidarity and prepared the ground for the Jewish national idea. The pogroms of Russia were a particularly rude

---

<sup>5</sup> Avineri, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Hertzberg p. 125

<sup>7</sup> Avineri, "Modern Zionism", p 38.

awakening for two champions of assimilation Moses Lilienblum and Leo Pinsker. Once strong advocates of the Enlightenment and Haskalah movements they could no longer believe that humanism would defeat hatred of the Jews.

Lilienblum signifies the shift from passive Zionism to active political Zionism as he appeals to the secular political values of Jews in assimilated society. In his article entitled "The way of the return" (1881) Lilienblum gives utterance to his apprehensions of the unsafe position of the Jews "in exile,"<sup>8</sup> and points to the re-establishment of the Jews in Palestine as the only solution of the Jewish question. Like Hess, Lilienblum wrote that progress and civilization during the European enlightenment was doing nothing to eradicate anti-Semitic views but "indirectly help them along".<sup>9</sup> He devotes a large chapter as of his writing to proposing a practical plan for Jewish immigration to Eretz Israel, describing a payment plan by which to acquire property in the land, suggesting various means of collection of huge sums of money to buy many large land holdings in Israel from the Turkish government in order to establish a secular Jewish, cultural state where the Jews could live a "normal national life".<sup>10</sup>

Much like Hess, Lilienblum recognizes that his main obstacle would be difficulty in gaining the support of "the enlightened people (who) have become estranged."<sup>11</sup> Many feared tainting these new values and preventing further assimilation into secular European society by acknowledging the "pessimism" underpinning Zionist sentiment.

The efforts of the first political Zionist thinkers in the raising of funds, awareness and support were rigorous and revolutionary. As a result of their writing, advocacy, practical plans and their pleas to Jewish philanthropists such as the Montefiores and the Rothschilds to sponsor agricultural settlements, a small group of immigrants from Russia migrated to Eretz Israel in 1882. This has become known in Zionist history as the First Aliyah. Furthermore, their efforts led to the establishment of a Committee meeting at Odessa (1883) for the colonization of Palestine, where representatives of all European Jewries met and discussed plans of colonization in Palestine, thus laying the foundation for the Zionist movement- Hibbat Zion. Nevertheless, because of restrictions emplaced on immigration to Palestine by the Ottoman authorities, lack of funding and the complex and conflicting predicaments imposed on Jews during the nineteenth century, the work of these earlier thinkers was never fully realized. However, the various political and religious affiliations and inspiration on "forerunners of Zionism"<sup>12</sup> can be found permeating through the

---

<sup>8</sup> Hertzberg pg. 169

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p.174

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 177

<sup>11</sup> Ibid p. 176

<sup>12</sup> J. Katz., 'The Forerunners of Zionism', in Reinharz. Y. and Shapira A. Essential Papers on Zionism, (New York: New York University Press, 1996.) p. 33

later writing of Theodore Hertzl proving in fact that the notion had been building for decades and that these thinkers were a significant and fundamental role in the formation of the ideology.

### Bibliography

Avineri Shlomo. (ed) *The Making of Modern Zionism: The intellectual origins of the Jewish State*, London, Weildenfeld and Nicolson, 1981.

Hertzberg, A. (ed.) *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader*, New York: Anthenum, 1984

Katz J. "The Forerunners of Zionism", in Reinharz, Y. and Shapira, A. *Essential Papers on Zionism*, New York: New York University Press, 1996. pp33-45 (COURSE READER)

Vital, D. *The origins of Zionism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.