

Global Israel: 'The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem' Reconsidered

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IN 1897, ACHAD HAAM ATTENDED the first Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland. He wrote privately that he had felt like a "mourner at a wedding feast." Publicly, he wrote this:

It is not only the Jews that have come out of the Ghetto but Judaism has come out too. For Jews the exodus is confined to Western countries and is due to toleration; but Judaism has come out (or is coming out) of its own accord wherever it has come into contact with modern culture. This contact overturns defenses of Judaism from within, so that Judaism can no longer remain isolated and live apart. The spirit of the Jewish people strives for development; it wants to absorb those elements of general culture which reach it from outside, as it has done in other periods of history.

What did he mean by overturns Jewish defenses "from within"? This remains somewhat mysterious, of course; but he obviously meant to imply that modernity was organized around principles that Diaspora Jews intuitively recognized, felt vaguely to be their own, and reinforced their critical faculties, such that traditional life in the Pale, well, paled.

It was almost as if Achad Haam were warning that modernity, the emancipation, was a perfected version of what Jews, marinated in Judaism, intuitively believed; that the frictions of Jewish civilization were a kind of rough draft for an approach to really human ways of being, now implied by, but not fully realized in, the rabbinic tradition; that the Haskalah had brought what was in the back of minds to the tip of tongues.

"Since the day we left the Ghetto," AH writes in the "Transvaluation of Values," "and started to partake of the world's life and its civilization, we cannot help seeing that our superiority is potential merely. Actually we are not superior to other nations, even in the

sphere of morality. We have been unable to fulfill our mission in exile, because we could not make our lives a true expression of our own character, independent of the will of others.” Then again—surely he knew but did not say—who is ever free of the will of others? And what do we have to give that has not already been given? How, in other words, to *modernize* Judaism? Not—at least, not immediately—with an independent state, as Herzl had proclaimed at the Congress. Not by adopting agonal conceptions of nationhood implied by admirers of Nietzsche’s superman. Not by giving in to biological conceptions of tribe, or halachic conceptions of exclusiveness, or pathetic notions of the world—you know, that the goyim would never let you assimilate. The sadder truth was that they *would*, and Judaism was defenseless against what “the West” would offer.

So what Judaism needed, Achad Haam insisted, was “the creation in its native land of conditions favorable to its development: a growing settlement of Jews working without hindrance in every branch of culture, from agriculture and handicrafts to science and literature.” The process of nationalizing Jewish life would be full of worldly oxygen and take many generations.

In a way, the cultural innovations Achad Haam called for implied the remaking of European Jews into what Amos Oz called in his lovely memoir “Hebrew Europeans.” For Hebrew was the collective way of putting a Jewish instrument in every individual’s hand. It was democratizing, modernizing, liberating. In another essay, which AH entitled (clumsily, but precisely), “Competitive Emulation or Self-effacing Imitation,” he projected the emancipated Zionists’ future by revisiting the Jews’ confrontation with the ancients:

Long before the Hellenists in Palestine tried to substitute Greek culture for Judaism, the Jews in Egypt had come into close contact with the Greeks, with their life, their spirit, and their philosophy: yet we do not find among them any pronounced movement towards assimilation. On the contrary, they employed their Greek knowledge as an instrument for revealing the essential spirit of Judaism, for showing the world its beauty, and vindicating it against the proud philosophy of Greece.

This was code, clearly. The Hebrew writers of Zionism were now like “the Jews of Egypt” rehearsing that ancient Hellenizing genius and synthesis. “When they write,” Achad Haam himself writes, “the necessity of writing Hebrew springs from their innermost being; and they therefore strive to...express their thoughts in it with freedom, just as their ancestors did.” For Hebrew was the network of associations out of which Judaism’s cultural architecture—its “spirit”—took shape.

And when Hebrew national culture in Palestine has attained a level of development which rivaled other modern nations, he continued in “The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem,” then “we may be sure that it will produce men in the country people who, on a favorable opportunity, will be able to establish a state, which will be a Jewish state, and not merely a state of Jews.”

A generation later, in 1912, Achad Haam visited some of the Hebrew colonial settlements his circles inspired. He could hardly contain himself:

So soon as the Jew from the Diaspora enters a Jewish colony in Palestine he feels that he is in a Hebrew national atmosphere. The whole social order, from the Council of the colony to the school, bears the Hebrew stamp. They do not bear traces of that foreign influence that flows from an alien environment and distorts the pure Hebrew form. This preponderance is, albeit, half complete; extending only to the children. But the process of free development has only just begun, and is going on.

*A Jewish state, and not merely a state of Jews.* Clearly, Achad Haam did not mean a state of Halacha, the airlessness of which he was in flight from. He meant that the state would be liberal in the Western sense but have a describable character, something like what the writer Jonathan Miller meant when he was asked if he were a Jew and answered, “Well, I’m Jewish.” Then again, what Diaspora Jews like Miller would not have was the thing Achad Haam thought most precious. They might have civil rights but would lack Hebrew dignity. They would lack

especially a nuanced way into historic Jewish philosophical writings, legal principles, liturgy, poetics. They would lack the confidence to let go of the kitsch and the junk, the menorahs, and chopped liver, and schlemiel punch-lines. Because they would feel the forces of assimilation pressing in on them, they would guiltily hold on to all kinds of retrograde ideas, especially Halachic forms of dogmatism.

In contrast, Jews made confident by a national home would relish the chance to prove the strengths of their culture in open contest. Cultural Zionism would mean a Jewish people in competitive dialogue with the West. It would mean a people resilient in spirit, which would have the means to assimilate others, not only be assimilated itself.

WHY AM I GOING BACK to these views now? Because as followers of Israeli constitutional life discern growing crisis, trying to make sense of the term “Jewish and democratic,” never has Achad Haam’s vision been more second nature to Israelis in practice and more alien in theory. The paradox can drive one a little crazy. A Hebrew-speaking Jewish national home exists, feels itself an authentic product of our intercourse with the wider world, in which we compete wonderfully well. And yet most ordinary Israeli citizens think Achad Haam is the name of a cool street and, rather than feel his openness to the world, seem mired in what Arthur Koestler once called “claustrophilia.” Meanwhile, Israeli officials, and not a few writers and scholars like ourselves, traffic in faux-tributes to Halachic pieties and, yes, clichés like “Jewish sovereignty.”

Just listen, for example, to Ambassador Michael Oren, in a Yom Kippur sermon from a couple of years ago. His real purpose was to warn of physical dangers coming from armed enemies and unsympathetic Western diplomats. But then comes this: “Let's return to that Kafkaesque scenario in which you wake up one morning and find yourself transformed into Israel's prime minister. You know that to create that neighboring state that you're going to have to give up some land, but not just any land, but land regarded as sacred by the majority of the Jewish people for more than three thousand years...” and on and on in this vein.

You see? In one continuous thought, a bow to both Kafka and “sacred land.” The sentence is a tribute to what Orwell called “double-think.” But when you make law, and enforce state power, you have to choose. Do you live in a world of Kafka’s freedom and ironies or

rabbinic and settler dogmas about “holiness.” There is no middle ground here, no admiring synagogue audience to impress.

But, as I implied earlier, I have a similar queasiness when I hear the phrase Jewish sovereignty, the subject of this conference. This phrase, like Jewish “self-determination,” feels vivid because the horrors of the holocaust feel so poignant that insistence on AH’s style of precision seems just a little tactless. It has become something of a convenience to borrow, say, from the UN debates in 1947 and simplify the founding of Israel—hence, presumably, the ongoing legitimacy of its state apparatus—into the old political Zionist principle, that bad things happen to Diaspora Jews when they are a minority, presumably, in the states of larger nations or empires: that the Jewish nation, of all nations, deserves a state of its own, power, the experience of being “a majority.” No more being pushed around by *them*.

Implicitly, in this context, we know what nations are, we know what the Jewish nation is, we know that nations have states, that is, the right to “self-determination,” that sovereignty flows naturally from the fact of this right, and so forth. Our turn to push against the empire of gentiles, like Serbs against Hapsburgs, or Syrians against Ottomans—freedom from imperial repressions, the only context in which a phrase as plastic and wistful as “national self-determination” seems vaguely meaningful.

But people with democratic instincts suppose, surely, that a state apparatus derives its just powers from the consent of the governed. There is an implicit social contract here—not one renegotiated every moment, but in principle up for renegotiation forever, so that inevitable social changes can be accommodated non-violently, a peace process without end. The idea that *nationality* vaguely defined endows states with legitimacy, so that, ideally, every nation has something like a natural right to its own state would be, for democrats, arguable enough. In the case of Israel, it would imply that the myriad facts of nationality, including all the differences between, say, Uri Avnery and Ovadia Yosef, collapse into an implicit consensus regarding national coherence: or that a democracy’s implicit social contract, whence the state apparatus derives “its just powers,” can assume consent from nothing more than a national majority. This is nonsense.

The same doubts can be raised with respect to the phrase self-determination. Democrats know—or let's say readers of everything from Emerson's essays to Portnoy's Complaint *should* know—that self-determination is, at best, a struggle enmeshed in other selves, which make self-determining pretty hopeless. And here we are talking about individuals. A nation, in contrast, is nothing like a self; a state is not a person. National self-determination can apply to a moment of collective insurrection, which (if the collective is lucky) may help establish a democratic social contract.

But national self-determination cannot remain the basis for democratic legitimacy. There is no Jewish national personality. Every Uri Avnery does not have an Ovadia Yosef struggling to come out.

Asserting Jewish sovereignty as a collective right begs the question of what individuals qualify to become members of the collective, and to which “just powers” might they reasonably consent. Any national collective that supposes inclusion is based on anything other than and learned culture, or exerts power in ways that preclude the individuality and creativity and perversity of people, is not just immoral, but not even what Achad Haam meant by “modern.”

The real Jewish nation, then—the one Zionism created out of diaspora Jewish communities, and the only one that has a claim to give a “Jewish” character to a democratic state—is a permeable community of Hebrew speaking citizens (the democrats among them—dare I say it?—Apikorsim); people who constitute the precondition, the civil society, in which consent of the governed might be presupposed. Hebrew speakers, this collective of infinitely complex individuals, each with unalienable rights, have in common a special purchase on accumulated Jewish sacred texts, narratives, fictions, liturgy, legal debates, mystical speculations, music, historical records, etc.

The state, in this context, may create a space for, but not a privilege for, Halachic Judaism. Orthodox communities may seek, voluntarily, to practice what they wish, but without their hands on the state's treasury. The state, for its part, may not deem any book as sacred, but must deem the right to interpret books as sacred.

Gershom Scholem, arguably, has implied that secular aims are in some sense futile; that the sacred nuances of Hebrew may be too dangerous for the kind of democratic society I have

been defending. What's between the lines will eventually have their way, a kind of return of the repressed. And there may be some truth to this: Koestler once wrote of his fear that Hebrew cannot convey the shades of meaning that modern people require to express their emotional lives; that you cannot, as he puts it, play a scherzo on a ram's horn.

Nor does the Hebrew language, with its definite characteristics, fail to be an enigma. As Menachem Brinker has put it: When an Israeli eats a salad, the names of his vegetables have come from different places over a 2600 year period: radishes and onions are from the Bible, cucumber is from the *Mishna*, the tomato is an innovation from Kibbutz Degania, the first kibbutz of the Second Aliyah at the turn of the century; then there is the word for lettuce, which comes from Arabic."

None of this undermines the claim that Israel should try to adhere to secular standards while having a right to maintain Hebrew's linguistic distinction, in its schools, and so forth. And if Israeli leaders wish for their country the kind of global legitimacy accorded to, say, the states in the European Union, they will have to define "Jewish sovereignty" in this very restricted way: a democratic state, a Jewish character.

Israel's Hebrew-speaking "moderns" will use the materials of historic Jewish life to express their individual purposes, the way, for example, Roth, who would be (absurdly) admitted to Israel under the Law of Return, uses American English. And, yes, Israeli Arabs and Filipino immigrants can appropriate this form of Jewish nationality, too, should they wish to.

SO HERE IS THE challenge. Can Israel's citizens, therefore, circumcise their hearts? Expose themselves to the methods, ethical principles, and creative achievements of the wider world? Actually, we are living through an unprecedented moment testifying to Achad Haam's vindication. In contrast with Israelis concerned about sacred land, concentrated in the parties of Greater Israel, are advocates for what I have called Global Israel. Their country is, after all, as dependent on globalization as Silicon Valley. Tel Aviv is among the world's most cosmopolitan cities. Entrepreneurial competition has thrust tens of thousands of young Israelis into the world. Scientific competition leads to cultural competition and appropriation. Rap music

unleashes the Jewish spirit of Shotei Hanevuah. (I will leave it to Sidra to teach us about the influences of the metaphysical poets on, say, Yehuda Amichai.)

The challenge, you see, is not a Jewish and democratic state. The challenge is to define both “Jewish” and the claim of sovereignty in ways democrats everywhere can endorse. And the challenge is made greater by any hope of peace with Palestinians. For what sovereign jurisdictions can Israel’s state apparatus hope to exercise without confederal relations with the city-state next door? Without the Negev, the whole territory for Israelis and Palestinians is about the size of greater Los Angeles. Think of water, bandwidth, tax collection, currency, tourism, quite apart from solutions for Jerusalem and the security of the Jordan Valley. What if not shared sovereignty is necessary to any democratic solution?

The key here, for Israelis, is openness to cultural competition, that would burnish Jewish culture, make it—or some of it—fit to be cherished, changed and thus preserved. The Jewish people would learn who they are by competing on an equal footing with the peoples of the world, breathing in what was superior, letting go what failed to prove itself. The first prophet of the kibbutz movement, Aaron David Gordon, an admirer of Achad Haam, put it this way, reflecting on what of the Hebrew bible Zionists might preserve. He can have the last word: “Look here, my friend: I am not speaking of the ‘historical’ value of Scriptures, but of the opinions and poetry contained in them; and for us, their greatness is not in what they say, but what they don’t yet say, in what we and coming generations will say, as it were, from within them, that is, from the Torah that’s inscribed in our hearts.”