

'The Jewish State' at 100

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Anyone who witnessed the two-hundredth anniversary of the American revolution—the displays of fireworks, the sailing ships and air shows; the performances of the *1812 Overture*, the rock concerts, pageants and parades; the live reenactments on battlefields all over the country; the waves of specially minted coins and stamps recalling every conceivable hero of the revolution, from George Washington and Thomas Jefferson to Crispus Attucks (the Boston black who gave his life in the first skirmishes with the British) and Haym Salomon (the Philadelphia Jew who bankrolled the Continental armies); the endless television documentary coverage on all commercial stations, including the “Bicentennial Minute” in which the nation’s most famous personalities took turns chronicling the twists and turns of the revolution every evening for more than two years; and the general clamor raised by public figures, institutions, schools and businesses, whether out of public-spiritedness or the simple desire to cash in—anyone who saw all of this then, and is now witness to the Jewish state’s observance of its own centennial, the hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the Jewish national movement as a political organization in 1897, cannot but be struck by the sense of something terribly wrong, of a commonwealth whose health and spirit have fallen to ruin.

Of course, Israel is a small country, and it could never have contemplated approaching the sheer firepower applied to celebrating the founding of the United States. But the commemoration of the American bicentennial was not impressive solely because of its colossal scale. It was impressive primarily because it was so sincere and unforced a reflection of the fact, perhaps submerged somewhat during the Vietnam years, that Americans in every corner of the United States were devoted to, and proud to take part in, the common history and ideas of their republic. That is, it was an expression of commitment, self-confidence and even pleasure—the pleasure that Americans take in the achievements of their nation. One cannot blame the apathy and ambivalence, the utter lethargy which characterize the anniversary of the Zionist movement on a small nation’s lack of resources. If there has been almost no public expression by Israelis of such commitment, self-confidence and pleasure in the achievements of their nation, it is because—as in America during Vietnam—it has been submerged in confusion, and lost in embarrassment. This is, of course, the better case. The worse possibility is that it does not exist.

Let us take as an example the passing this year, with hardly a flicker of public interest, of what should have been a linchpin of the centennial commemorations of the Zionist movement: The hundredth anniversary of the publication on February 14, 1896, of Theodor Herzl’s *The Jewish State: An Attempt at a Modern Solution to the Jewish Question*. Others might find it odd to think of a country’s history as beginning with a pamphlet, but among the Jews the publication of the first systematic program for the establishment of their national independence had the same kind of effect that the battle of Lexington had in the American colonies: It was “the shot heard round the world.” The pamphlet instantly catapulted Herzl to the leadership of Jewish nationalism, and within eighteen months it had triggered the convening of the first international Jewish congress—the First Zionist Congress in Basel—something which until then had been contemplated seriously only by anti-Semites. There followed a furious struggle which, within six years, had brought about advanced negotiations with Britain over laying

the foundations for a Jewish state in Sinai, and which, after Herzl's death and the British invasion of Palestine, culminated in an agreement to reconstitute Palestine as "the Jewish National Home." Herzl's pamphlet was, in fact, the opening shot in the Jewish national revolution.

In Israel of 1996, the drama surrounding the appearance of *The Jewish State* was virtually without public presence; it would be absurd to say that it even scraped the public consciousness. True, someone did make sure to publish a commemorative edition of the pamphlet, and the daily *Ha'aretz*, the newspaper of record, did carry one excellent article analyzing Herzl's diplomatic achievements (although not the contents of the pamphlet itself) on page D3.¹ But the only other mention of the anniversary in the national press was a sleazy little column by the notorious post-Zionist demagogue Uri Avineri in the daily *Ma'ariv*, listing every bizarre or humiliating "fact" ever discovered or fabricated regarding Herzl's life; the following week he smugly reported that "the hundredth anniversary of the appearance of *The Jewish State* passed last week and was not marked anywhere outside this space..."²

The Hebrew University did hold a conference on Herzl about six weeks after the actual anniversary, which merited a second article in *Ha'aretz*—this one made it up to page B4—interviewing Prof. Robert Wistrich, the conference organizer, who actually bothered to address Herzl's ideas and their importance to the Jewish state. He opined that Israelis "have no time to think twenty years backwards, certainly not a hundred years," and that Herzl "doesn't speak to us anymore," before going on to claim that Herzl overlooked the Arabs as a problem and to express amazement that he is regarded as a preeminent Jewish statesman considering "the fact that all of his diplomatic moves failed." The interviewer helpfully added, based on his talks with other conference participants, that Herzl's economic teachings, "although not much discussed, are perhaps one of the only areas of his vision that are relevant to our own day," and that researchers have recently claimed that Herzl may have been emotionally disturbed.³ Two other articles which appeared in the wake of the conference were even worse, both

of them breaking the silence to try and demonstrate that Herzl was not really the father of Jewish nationalism as the history books suppose, but rather a “post-Zionist” himself (both articles flaunted this epithet in the headline): The journalist-historian Tom Segev averred that had Herzl been aware of the Arab opposition to Zionism, he would probably have chosen to build his state in Argentina rather than Palestine,⁴ while Rachel Elbaum-Dror of the Hebrew University insisted that the Law of Return granting Jews the right to automatic citizenship in the Jewish state is “certainly not in keeping with the spirit” of Herzl’s ideas.⁵

With the change of government last summer, there has been one sign of a shift, at least as regards the official treatment of the pamphlet’s centennial by the state. On September 9, the telephone company, responding to pressure from the new, more nationalistically oriented Communications Minister, belatedly issued a commemorative telephone card—Israeli payphones take them instead of coins—with a likeness of Herzl and the name of his pamphlet printed on it. Two months later, someone woke up at the daily *Ma’ariv*, which published—now eight and a half months late—a weekend section trying to ascertain the opinions of public figures regarding some of Herzl’s teachings. But here, too, the editors could not resist publishing an introductory piece explaining that it’s worth paying attention to Herzl because he once had a Christmas tree, visited brothels in Vienna and “was attracted to young girls, as well,” and, most important, because of the contempt he supposedly harbored for the Jewish crowds who greeted him with the emotional nationalistic cries of “Long live the King of the Jews!”⁶

Perhaps other such commemorative activities are to follow. But even if they are, this will not alter the fact, in plain view for an entire year, that the vast majority of Israel’s cultural-political leaders have ignored Herzl because he means nothing to them: They were never inspired by him, they know very little of the ideas with which he hoped to equip the Jewish people, and what they do know suggests that were they to dig just a little deeper, they would find someone as unlike them as—Bismarck. The absent centennial of Herzl’s nationalism is more than just an expression of ingratitude and

impiety, although it is certainly that. Ignoring *The Jewish State* is the easiest way to suppress a founding father whose understanding of the needs and goals of the Jewish state were much removed from what has been accepted in Israel for a very long time.

II

Like other political conservatives, Herzl believed that the survival and well-being of the state are inextricably connected to building its power. For this reason *The Jewish State*, which was principally intended as an instruction manual for constructing a Jewish polity, is first and foremost devoted to elaborating Herzl's unique understanding of how national power is built and maintained.

For Herzl, national strength was not primarily a matter of acquiring physical assets such as armed forces, farms and factories, as his opponents, the forebears of Labor Zionism, argued. While he did of course believe that the Jewish state would acquire these, they could never be the source of true national strength: Rather, it was the *idea* of the nation in the mind of the people that was the source of the nation's real power. Far from basing himself on today's materialistic conception of "nation-building"—the security services, bureaucracies, foreign aid, technology transfers and state economic projects which supposedly indicate that a country is "developing"—Herzl believed that nations are built by acquiring those assets of mind which will serve to deepen the people's interest in the nation's existence and their desire to take part in it.

In *The Jewish State*, Herzl wrote of developing three such assets of mind—entrepreneurial, religious and cultural—arguing that the state must become a dynamic "center" for each. It was the creativity of the Jewish mind that would create a state whose power would reside in its attractiveness, its

magnetism as an idea, for the Jews and for all mankind: The desire for individual achievement would be drawn by the nation's entrepreneurial centers; the desire for unity with one's people and tradition, its past and future, would be drawn by the religious centers; and the desire for the universal and supranational would be satisfied by the strength of the state's cultural centers. If this effort were successful, the Jewish state would become an attractive "home" in the mind of every Jew, and all Jews could be expected eventually to immigrate and make their lives there; if it failed, it would be impossible to win the loyalty of the Jewish people on a permanent basis.

With regard to the first center, *The Jewish State* is fairly clear as to what Herzl was proposing. He was outspoken in his belief that the key to creating economic strength lay in constructing an environment that would attract the creative abilities of private enterprise, for "all our welfare has been brought about by entrepreneurs."⁷ In particular, he believed in the existence of a "Jewish spirit of enterprise"⁸ which characterized the Jews as a people, and which made them capable of gathering "terrifying financial power" whenever permitted by law to conduct business freely.⁹ Indeed, it was each Jew's desire to unshackle his own abilities that Herzl believed would bring most of the Jews in the world to come to the new Jewish state: "The Jews will soon realize that a new and permanent field has opened up for their spirit of enterprise, which has hitherto been met with hatred and contempt."¹⁰ Far from being a nation like all others, Herzl believed this awesome Jewish economic power would make Israel "a land of experiment and a model country"¹¹ that would enlighten the world with ideas, discoveries and achievements. "Ours," he wrote, "must truly be the Promised Land."¹²

The second asset of the mind that Herzl believed necessary for empowering the new state was the flourishing of the Jewish religion. He considered Judaism to have been indispensable in nurturing the national idea in the minds of the people in the past ("All through the night of their history the Jews have not ceased to dream this royal dream: 'Next year in Jerusalem'"¹³), and he believed it would continue to be essential in the future ("we recognize our historic identity only by the faith of our fathers"¹⁴). For this reason,

Herzl insisted that the national awakening of the Jews and their ingathering into Israel should be led by rabbis, and that the synagogues in the newly built Jewish state “be visible from afar, since the old faith is the only thing that has kept us together.”¹⁵ But he considered the most important expression of religion in the Jewish state to be the establishment of centers of faith—not synagogues, but national holy places to which the Jews could come in pilgrimage, and which would ignite the imagination of the people, inspiring in them an attachment to their Jewish past and their common destiny.¹⁶

On the nature of cultural centers, the third type Herzl mentions, *The Jewish State* is nearly silent, a failing for which he was to suffer outspoken criticism at the hands of Ahad Ha’am. But from his other writings it seems clear that Herzl believed in the importance of cultural institutions—not, as Ahad Ha’am instinctively grasped, because these institutions have a direct and decisive effect on politics—but because people will no more live without “amusements” than without food and faith. As he once replied to the Viennese author Richard Beer-Hofmann, who had insisted that there would be nothing for him in the wastes of Palestine: “We will have a university and an opera, and you will attend the opera in your swallow-tailed coat with a white gardenia in your button-hole.”¹⁷

Once carefully assembled, these centers would become “home” in every way and for every Jew, and the affinity for them would itself be the Jewish national idea, the whole Jewish nationalism that would bring the Jews of the world to make their lives in the Jewish state: “For all these centers taken together constitute a long-sought entity, one for which our people has never ceased to yearn...—a free homeland.”¹⁸

Remarkably, Herzl’s theory of national power was based almost entirely on the power of ideas, with precious little left to physical power. Although Herzl believed the Jewish state would have an army and a strong diplomatic position based on the ability of this army to contribute to the defense of the West—in this he preceded AIPAC by more than six decades¹⁹—the fact remained that no amount of military power could secure the state without the

internal strength mustered by a compelling national idea in the public mind; if the political leadership did not secure the flourishing of the Jewish mental state and the three powers that flow from it, the Jewish state would end up being of only “temporary” interest to the Jews²⁰ and would not endure.

Herzl died in 1904, a mere eight years after the publication of *The Jewish State*, and in many ways Zionism has still not recovered from this loss. The Zionist Organization he had founded to implement his ideas rapidly lost touch with what was in *The Jewish State*. Increasingly dominated by Herzl’s opponents, the ZO became obsessed with the “practical” work of fundraising to subsidize farms and factories in Palestine—in effect substituting the materialist aims of Russian socialism, and of the Labor Zionism that was its ideological stepchild, for the goals of mind that Herzl had prescribed.

III

Labor Zionism originated in Russia at the time when Marxist dialectical materialism was at the peak of its influence, and it is from there that Ben-Gurion’s movement inherited its messianic materialism—the idea that it is physical things such as the body, the land and the means of production which hold the keys to human redemption. As Ben-Gurion described it, Labor Zionism meant bringing “masses of feeble, unproductive, parasitic Jews to fruitful labor.... We intend to transform the entire nation, without exception ... into workers in Palestine. This is the essence of our movement....”²¹ Labor Zionism therefore sought to create a “new Jew”—the coarse, powerful, anti-intellectual “Sabra” of whom Yitzhak Rabin was the epitome—and it was this man whom Labor Zionism held to have been redeemed.

Implausible as this doctrine of materialist salvation may have been, both its Soviet Russian and Labor Zionist versions succeeded in plodding on for decades, propped up by the constant threat of imminent war and the constant promise of imminent victory. When finally the tension eased somewhat, each of these ideologies independently proved incapable of transmission to the next generation—and collapsed. In Russia, it was only a matter of decades before the Soviet itself followed suit. In Israel, the consequences of the end of Labor Zionism are still unfolding, but the direction is the same.

It is of course no simple matter criticizing David Ben-Gurion and the Labor Zionists who had come to dominate life in Jewish Palestine by the 1930s. It is undeniable that without their intransigent and heroic administration of the Jewish settlements in the face of anti-Semitic regimes in Eastern Europe and Germany, Arab pogroms and the British repudiation of the idea of the Jewish state, Israel would likely never have been born. Yet it is also a fact, with which we must today come to terms, that one may read Ben-Gurion's writings and speeches by the hundreds of pages without finding any indication that he recognized the long-term importance of building up the assets of mind which would deepen the Jewish state as an idea and gain it strength in the minds of the Jews. Unlike many of his compatriots, Ben-Gurion avoided the language of materialism, and he frequently used terms like "spirit," "culture" and "the visions of the prophets" in exhorting to the nation-building tasks at hand. But a glance at the context invariably reveals that these things served as little more than levers for securing ever more physical power. For example, in a fifty-page essay written in 1951 summarizing the aims of the fledgling state—principally the building of new farming settlements, a greater armed forces and an effective bureaucracy—the following is found in the minuscule section devoted to the importance of the Bible and the Hebrew cultural revival:

[T]he first years of resurgence have braced and reinforced Jewish power and built up the vigor of Israel. Plows and tractors, mattocks and bulldozers, machines and forges, rifles and machine-guns, aircraft and ships, farms and factories, transport and laboratories, stables and granaries, installations and shelters, barbed-wire and trenches, roads and plantations—for our survival, we must assure the proliferation and perfection of these without remission or surcease. Therefore must the spirit abide within us, in our heart and soul, wonderful, invisible.²²

There are those who argue that there was no choice but to adopt the materialism of the Labor Zionists given the circumstances of a land lacking in basic infrastructure and “absorptive capacity.” Others believe the opposite—that it was the ZO’s devotion to subsidizing Labor movement *kibbutzim* and socialized industries at the expense of all other sectors which precluded the possibility of massive Jewish immigration, delaying the birth of the Jewish state by a decade and helping to doom the very European Jews whom Jewish settlement in Israel was supposed to save. But in either case, it is difficult to deny that the Jewish state that came into being in 1948 reflected Labor’s priorities and not Herzl’s—and still does.

IV

In retrospect, we can see that even before the founding of the Jewish state, there were two foci of resistance to the materialist Labor Zionist theories that considered the Jew who was not “a worker in Palestine” to be unproductive and parasitic: The first was the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, which became a hothouse of humanist-universalist resistance to Ben-Gurion’s nationalist views, publishing and teaching that the state could not organize itself around socialist Zionism without gravitating towards messianism and

fascism; the second was the Orthodox yeshiva world, within which a new tradition-based Jewish nationalism gradually began to take shape as an alternative Zionist ideology.

By the time Ben-Gurion finally fell from power in 1963, after three decades of unbroken domination of the country, the substantially more developed ideas emanating from these two sources had already begun to displace the terminally immature idea of Labor nationalism as the conceptual framework within which to construct a rationale for life in Israel. In particular, Ben-Gurion's last years in power were marked by increasingly acrimonious public broadsides from "the professors," who considered his Labor Zionist ideas to be "dictatorial" and "totalitarian," and whose attacks did much to discredit him and hasten his fall. And when, after retirement, he called for a new generation of Labor Zionist pioneers to join him in settling the wastes of the Negev, he found that he had failed to raise up a next generation willing to make the sacrifice with him; the Negev remains mostly barren to this day.

The machinery of the Labor party, preoccupied as always with guns and factories, seems hardly to have noticed the gaping cultural void created by Ben-Gurion's departure. But among the professors and their disciples, the demise of "the old man" was received as the first opportunity to create a more "normal" Israel, which would apply itself less to archaic and dangerous Zionist missions, and more to obtaining peace abroad and personal self-fulfillment at home—what we would today call a "Post-Zionist" Israel.

Far from being a sign of advancing materialism, as is often claimed among Zionist diehards, the turn towards Post-Zionist values in Israel after Ben-Gurion was precisely the opposite: It represented the search for something *higher* on the part of many intelligent, even spiritual Jews, for whom trying to persist on the inspiration of Labor Israel's actually rather mediocre physicality meant suffocation. Thus the prominent novelist Amos Oz recalls his alienation as a youth from what he calls the "sub-civilization" that was classical Labor Zionist society:

They had contempt for everything I was. Contempt for emotions other than patriotism, contempt for literature other than [nationalist poet Natan] Alterman. Contempt for values other than courage and stout-heartedness, contempt for law other than the law of “strength makes the man.”²³

Among today’s Post-Zionists, there are competing conceptions as to what must be done to satisfy the longings of many Israelis for freedom, creativity, intellectualism, constitutionalism, internationalism and a touch of universalism—all things which Labor Zionism, in its tribalism, provincialism and materialism, had never been able to provide. Some believe that the “New Israel” will be constructed through the elimination of Judaism and the Jewish people as motive interests of the state, since these are said to lead to racism and the corruption of Israeli democracy. Some advocate stripping Judaism of anything national or particularistic, since such associations are said to corrupt the humanism of the Jewish faith. Some, including former prime minister Shimon Peres, argue that the era of the national state is in any case coming to an end, and that Israel would do untold economic or cultural or political harm to its citizens were it to resist the trend towards falling borders and the abandonment of old, battle-scarred identities. But the bottom line is always the same: In academia and in the media, among writers and artists and in the legal establishment—indeed, in every corner where a non-observant Jew might seek to come to meaningful terms with his country and his world—the idea of the Jewish national state is understood to be destructive, undesirable and certainly *passé*.

Precisely as Herzl had feared, the absence of a compelling national idea has rendered the interest of the Jews in the Jewish national state “temporary.” Many in Israel have simply tired of it, and have gone on to pursuing other dreams.

V

Many, but not all. It was four years after Ben-Gurion's resignation from government that the Six Day War brought the Jewish state back to most of the places to which the biblical prophets had foretold the Jews would one day return. No greater vindication could have been imagined for Herzl's understanding of the role of religious centers in building the loyalty of a nation than the consequent upsurge of the national idea among observant Jews—many of them able to make pilgrimage for the first time to places they had only read about but had always believed to be “home.” These feelings were given the most powerful intellectual expression by theories emanating from the Merkaz Harav Kook yeshiva in Jerusalem. Since the 1920s, “Merkaz” had offered religious sanction for the Ben-Gurionist idea that the toil of Labor's non-observant farmers was in fact the first step towards the redemption—since the prophets had foretold that a physical restoration would precede the restoration of the spirit. But such “Kooknik” notions had remained distant from the consciousness of most devout Jews so long as Israel was merely another unimpressive levantine republic, without access even to Old Jerusalem. It was only with the return to hundreds of ancient Jewish battlefields, capital cities and gravesites, in places such as Hebron, Bethlehem, Shiloh and Jericho, that the yeshiva world for the first time began to feel that Israel really could become something much more significant than the disappointing reality it had been. Herzl's religious centers had finally come into being, and with them a new generation of Jewish nationalism was abruptly born.

The change was most rapid and most dramatic in the “religious Zionist” community, which until 1967 had been little more than an ideological appendage of Labor Zionism, touting Ben-Gurionist socialism as the message of the prophets, and trumpeting its egregious youth-movement slogan, “Tora and Labor.” Politically, the religious Zionists had supported

the leadership of Labor Zionism in virtually all issues of foreign and economic policy, reserving their power for securing minimum government conformity to Jewish ritual and state funds for their institutions—an agenda seemingly designed to earn the contempt of all but their most immediate constituency. The evaporation of Labor Zionism, however, led to a dramatic turning of the tables. Within a handful of years, it became evident that the only Zionist idea with any kick left in it was the yeshiva nationalism of Merkaz, and the religious-nationalist leadership, suffused with a new sense of responsibility to lead the nation, ran forward to pick up where Ben-Gurion had left off. Thus it was that despite drawing from a substantial canon of new Zionist philosophical teachings, the *practical* imperatives championed by Merkaz turned out to be absurdly similar to those of the original Labor Zionism: The “worker” was replaced by the observant Jew in the van of the new movement’s struggle for redemption, but the materialistic concerns that had been at the heart of Labor—Jewish settlement of the land, Jewish immigration, military service and even farming—remained virtually unchanged.

Instead of producing the “normalization” of the country envisioned by the Post-Zionist intellectual elite, the years between 1967 and 1992 therefore saw Israel descend into a protracted struggle over the reemergence of a new national idea eerily reminiscent of Ben-Gurionism—yet all the less palatable to its detractors for its religious color. Archaic and dangerous Zionist missions, so recently suppressed, had been given a whole new lease on life, and for much of the 1970s, when the Merkaz-inspired neo-settlement movement was at its high point of activism on the West Bank and the Golan Heights, in Gaza and Sinai and East Jerusalem, it even seemed as though the ideological initiative in Israeli society had gone over to the new nationalism. The image of the coarse, powerful, anti-intellectual kibbutznik at the cutting edge of Israeli society was replaced by the coarse, powerful, anti-intellectual yeshiva student. The IDF’s elite units, once the exclusive preserve of the children of the collective farms, began finding themselves inundated by religious cadets whose motivation and willingness to sacrifice were

the highest in the country—at a time when falling motivation had been widely feared as the gravest threat to the future of the Israeli military. And for the first time, observant Jews began to constitute the majority of immigrants and talent coming to Israel from the free world. Religious Zionism began to be understood not only as the last Zionism, but also as the last ideological force capable of motivating Jews to sacrifice on behalf of a nation which, in spite of everything, was still in need of such sacrifices.

Perhaps the most important effect of the renewed commitment to the Jewish state in religious circles was its impact on the mainstream political right. The Likud party, the political heir to the non-socialist Zionist movements of the center and right, had never really been a player in the high-stakes game to establish a political vision of the Jewish state. Having failed to found a college, a newspaper or any other serious organ for the development of political ideas, the “secular” right became culturally inert in the years after the founding of the state. When Menahem Begin finally came to power in 1977, it was principally through the alliance with the Merkaz-inspired settlement movement that Likud leaders were able to catch some of the adrenaline of the Ben-Gurionist revival taking place in the religious community and feel they stood at the helm of something grand. Some prominent figures in the Likud even fell into the habit of speaking of the “national camp” (Likud and its religious allies) as “the new Mapai”—using the old Hebrew name for Ben-Gurion’s politically and ideologically dominant Labor party.

With the benefit of hindsight, we now know that this triumphalism was, if not entirely misplaced, at least hopelessly premature. The fact is that in the struggle for the heart of the Jewish nation, Merkaz and its allies lost—and badly. The cultural wasteland surrounding the Likud remained pristine during fifteen years in power. And the settlers, despite winning widespread respect and admiration for their idealism, managed to leave the overwhelming majority of Israelis untouched by the spirit of the revival they represented. Even as Merkaz and the settlers sought to rally the country back to its Jewish mission by reminding it of what Labor Zionism had stood for, the

majority was being drawn further *away* from Labor Zionist values with each passing year. No more clear-cut rejection of Merkaz's message could have been imagined than the Oslo agreement with Yasser Arafat, which granted the PLO control over the geographic core of ancient Israel—and therefore explicitly rejected the return to these lands that the biblical prophets had promised. And yet by the time this deal was cut in 1993, nearly two-thirds of the Israeli public was (at least immediately after the signing) willing to accept it.

The rejection of Merkaz's appeal to Ben-Gurionist values by a generation well along in its Post-Zionism can be found, for example, in the assessment of the settlers by the familiar media commentator Amnon Dankner:

They hoped that if they were to look the figure of the mythological Sabra, with his shirt hanging out of his pants, with a shock of unruly hair and a firearm, they would become accepted and loved. But their hopes have been frustrated, for they command no real presence in the cultural mainstream and in the cultural elite. What we see today in their doings is kitsch....²⁴

It would be a serious misreading of events, however, to blame Merkaz's defeat on the overt popularity of Post-Zionism with the average Israeli. Outside of intellectual circles, the great majority of Israelis even today consider themselves Jews and Zionists; they see themselves as "traditionalists," and wish their children knew more about Judaism. There is therefore no question that during the heyday of the Likud-Merkaz alliance, the opportunity existed to construct a hefty Israeli consensus around a renewed and attractive Jewish national idea. But no such "idea work" was done on the side of Jewish nationalism to match all that was being invested by the Post-Zionists. For all the effort that had been poured by the yeshivas into constructing a new Zionist philosophy, it turned out that the fruits of these efforts were in the realm of highly abstracted theological concepts, almost none of which were relevant to the practice of piloting or even inspiring the

country as a whole. In all the areas of public life in which purpose and direction are so sorely needed if the Jewish state is to remain an attractive idea—what to do with its regimented economy, the chaos of its constitution, its endless diplomatic weakness or even its increasingly malignant cultural institutions—the new Zionists had nothing to say, and Jewish nationalism simply continued grinding out its crabbed old formula for success: Settlements, land, armies. And when this message of redemptive materialism was broached once more, it again failed to inspire belief in the desirability of a Jewish national life in Israel, just as it had when Ben-Gurion was selling it the first time around.

Merkaz failed not only in too faithfully adopting the content of Ben-Gurion's political message; it clung too closely to his political method as well. Like the Labor Zionists, the settlers relied almost exclusively on a linear politics whose standard of achievement was an additional house built, an additional Jew moved out to the settlements. Their political tools were consequently the most primitive conceivable: Pulling strings with the government for budgets to build homes in the territories, speechmaking in synagogues. Merkaz poured heart and fire into building homes in the territories and speechmaking in the synagogues. But the sectors of the population reached by these methods were always those *least* capable of influencing the broader context of the life of the nation. The core of Merkaz's support, even after decades of strenuous outreach, included few academics, journalists, authors, artists, jurists, economists, political thinkers—that is, shapers of the public mind. For every “fact on the ground” that the religious nationalists were able to generate, their opponents amassed another novel, another history text, another television production, cultural assets whose political influence was exponential, and which eventually outstripped that of the settlers by orders of magnitude.

Only now, after Oslo; and after the calls by members of the government to delete the Jewish references in the national anthem, *Hatikva*, so as not to offend Arab sensibilities; and after the establishment of an active PLO security apparatus functioning openly in the streets of Jerusalem; and after Shi-

mon Peres' calls for Israel to join the Arab League²⁵—only now have some in the “national camp” begun to understand the error. Only now have they begun to recognize that for a new Jewish nationalism to take root and ultimately triumph, there is no choice but to compete in all the realms of the mind in which Labor Zionism failed—and in which the Post-Zionists have invested everything.

VI

For most Israelis, the idea that their country is powerful is axiomatic, unchallengeable. American Jews, too, despite their greater sensitivity to Israel's vulnerability, are often willing to submit to the materialist illusion that factories and fighter planes are enough to make a nation strong. In this the liberal Jewish writer Leon Wieseltier gave voice to the wishful thinking of many when he wrote recently that:

The creation of Israel, the security of Israel, the peace of Israel: Who any longer thinks that these are experiments and dreams, efforts that may or may not fail, ideas and institutions still struggling to be born...? This is a country... [that] is fundamentally indestructible.²⁶

But Israel is not “fundamentally indestructible.” No nation is. The Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Canada—all these at one time looked “fundamentally indestructible” as well, if one were to judge by the material and military assets accumulated in their names. What rendered the survival of these states a question was not the want of factories and fighter planes, but the lack of a compelling national idea among the people. In each of these cases, it eventually transpired that the “state” in question was an abstraction to which its people were neither attracted nor loyal, and that little could be done to move them to action on its behalf.

And when one considers what Herzl believed would be required to render the Jewish state a compelling national idea and a home for the aspirations of the Jews, it becomes apparent that, beyond its material assets, Israel is not powerful at all. Of the three “centers” which Herzl considered indispensable for constructing the idea of the Jewish state, not one was ever the subject of concerted development by the Labor Zionism which built the material Jewish settlement. And the Post-Zionism and yeshiva nationalism which have sought to bring the idea of the State of Israel to maturity, each in its own way, have done only slightly better, each of the two movements watering tiny patches of the conceptual wilderness, while at the same time seeking to trample any aspect of the national idea that might be under cultivation by the other.

The entrepreneurial center. Each of Herzl’s assets of mind aimed to attract a different part of the Jewish soul, providing it with a sense of belonging and “home” in the Jewish state. Of these, it was the idea of the Jewish state as an entrepreneurial center with which he intended to attract that element which strives for individual success, and those individuals in whom this motive is dominant. It was for this reason that Herzl envisioned the Jewish state as a land of initiative and experiment, in which the individual Jew would have the freedom to assume personal risk in the pursuit of his private dreams. Only in this way would such individuals find fulfillment for themselves in Israel and create a better life for the Jewish people as a whole through the success of their efforts.

But Israeli society has since the 1930s been organized in accordance with the opposite idea: The belief that the good of the individual and his contributions to society should not be determined by means of personal initiative, but must be regulated by some central institution which is always presumed to know better—whether it be the Labor Federation, the army, the kibbutz or some other coercive collective. The result is a Jewish state which to this day enforces hundreds of “business constraints”—whose principal achievement is to prevent the individual from conducting his business affairs as he chooses; which controls the capital markets so that the private

entrepreneur cannot secure financial backing unless he is properly “connected”; and which punishes the entrepreneur for his successes through devastating rates of taxation. The suffocating nature of Israel’s market is reflected in statistics as well: In economic freedom, the economy of the Jewish state rates lower than those of Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.²⁷

No wonder, then, that Herzl’s dream of a state capable of attracting Jewish business talent to immigrate from the industrialized nations has never been realized: The authority of the Jewish state has been consistently aimed at *preventing* the enterprising individual from competing freely, so that he can never feel that in Israel he has found a welcoming home for his activities.

Nor is the state’s intolerance of creative entrepreneurship limited to business ideas. Opposition to private initiative and the insistence on subservience to a coercive center pervades every sphere of public endeavor. Both the electronic media and the university system—to name two other particularly important areas of national life—are the special preserve of tiny, government-enforced cartels which ensure that only certain ideas may be developed and promulgated. In dictatorial states, such mind-control is used to ensure that all available ideas are consonant with the continued existence of the regime. But in Israel, even this rationale does not exist: Both cartels grow more vicious in their assaults on the Jewish state with each passing year, and yet the government continues mindlessly preventing any intellectual competition from challenging them—for reasons no one in the country seems capable of articulating.

Virtually alone on the Israeli political landscape, Post-Zionists and others on the New Left have made conscientious, if often mistaken, efforts to make Israel a country in which the needs of the individual can find satisfaction—while cultural apolitical figures identified with Jewish nationalism have consistently opposed these efforts, believing that it is the introduction of “American” norms which has caused the destruction of the collective Jewish-national identity.²⁸ But the nationalists have tragically misunderstood the revolution they are witnessing: Post-Zionism is not a *consequence* of

increasing individual freedom; it is a *reaction* to decades of intentional suffocation of the individual by state socialism. That is, Post-Zionism is caused not by freedom, but by bondage. It is the abuse of the individual by the Labor Zionist state which has brought about the disgust for the Jewish national idea, just as it was the abuse of the individual by the Soviet state which brought disgust for the Communist idea, and the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The only way for the Jewish state to earn the love of that part of each Jewish soul which strives for individuality is by honoring it with freedom. It is the United States which has understood enough to grant real freedom to its citizens since its founding, and for this reason it is the United States—and not the centrally planned champion of collective values, the Soviet Union—which has retained the love of its people and has survived. Until the Jewish state becomes a place in which the individual Jew can, as Herzl demanded, strive in freedom to develop, implement and popularize his own ideas and reap his just rewards, the most talented and capable Jews will never be able to feel that Israel is truly their “home”—and they will continue to find their place elsewhere.

The religious center. Herzl intended that religious centers cultivate that part of the Jewish soul which seeks its place in the Jewish people’s unity and continuity, from the reaches of the farthest past and into the mists of the farthest future. Of Herzl’s three assets of mind, the idea of the Jewish state as a homeland of motivating religious sites is the only one that was ever the subject of systematic emphasis among Zionists of any stream; and it is the only area in which today’s Jewish nationalists have not completely ignored Herzl’s vision of true nation-building.

Beginning in 1967, the Jews have had the opportunity to transform the tels and tombs and battlefields that dot their ancient homeland from meaningless heaps of rubble into a system of religious, national and historic sites—places of prayer, places of memorial, places of learning—which could draw the heart of the nation. Some of the onerous work of restoration has in fact been done, primarily in Old Jerusalem, and on a more limited scale in

certain other sites such as Hebron. In return for these limited investments in “creating” national religious centers, the Jewish state has been lavishly rewarded with renewed strength: In the form of the heightened hold of the state on the imagination of its citizens; in the form of the many Jews who have been inspired to immigrate to their homeland as a result; and in terms of an increasing admiration and affinity for the Jewish state among Christians, for whom these places are slowly but inexorably gaining in importance as well.

But we should not exaggerate what has been achieved. In the United States, which still suffers from the lack of history associated with a young nation, every house in which the American revolutionaries conspired, every church from which they flashed their signal lamps, every tree under which one of their officers died, is registered as a historic site, given over to the hands of a local curator and transformed into a place of pilgrimage and meaning, no matter how small. One can drive from Boston to San Francisco, collecting the booklets of the local historical societies, explaining the meaning and the power of these places within the quiltwork of America’s young identity. Compare this with the *emptiness* of Judea and Samaria, where the thousands of events of the Bible, the Apocrypha, and much of the Talmud, the most meaning-stained events of human history, actually took place. Here, most of the excavations have not been seriously begun; most of the holy places remain unreconstructed and unvisited. A site such as the tel of Shiloh—which for nearly four centuries served as the capital of Israel during the period of the Judges—lies in ruins, virtually untouched, except by the children who play there as on any other dirt heap. Who knows what untold stories of our fathers may be learned from this sleeping hill; who knows what Jewish hearts it might touch, and what faith it might bring? But we have left Shiloh as it has been for two thousand years; and it has left us as we have been for two thousand years—in exile from it.

We do not yet know what the “final settlement” of which the politicians speak will bring, nor whether we shall ever know what lies buried in that tel. But we do know this—as the old Zionist recruiting poster had it:

Our past is where our future is. By building up these religious centers, making them deeper and stronger, allowing the shoots they send out into our culture and our consciousness to grow—in this way we build the true power of the Jewish state. And if, on the other hand, we allow these places to disappear from our horizon, we will make of the state a cripple in the only area where it was just now beginning to grow strong.

The cultural center. Finally, there is the desire of the Jew to participate in the eternal and the universal—to learn truth and beauty as it can be apprehended by every mind, and to make a contribution to expounding this truth before the world. It is to draw that part of the soul which seeks such heights that Herzl foresaw the need to establish Israel as a center of universities and opera houses. And here, too, the achievements of the Jewish state have been marginal. This subject is particularly sensitive because there are so many for whom the revival of the Hebrew language—the existence of the Hebrew University, Hebrew-language literature, theater and film—is in itself the decisive cultural achievement,²⁹ so much so that to describe Jewish national culture in Israel as a failure is for many a blasphemy. But both the partisans and the skeptics of Zionism warned sternly at the beginning of this century against the error of mistaking the resurrection of Hebrew for the establishment of a significant cultural center: Franz Rosenzweig, for example, argued that those who insisted on thrilling with excitement over every menu published in Hebrew would make it impossible to evaluate the merit of genuine Hebrew culture, and sarcastically suggested that there would be no choice but to discount in advance three-quarters of the acclaim that would be received by such works.³⁰ Herzl, too, although a supporter of the Hebrew revival, nonetheless feared that it would turn the Jewish state into a shallow “linguistic ghetto”³¹ without real cultural achievements to speak of. Even Ahad Ha’am, the great advocate of Israel as a cultural center, railed against the kind of Hebrew culture he saw developing, “almost all translation or imitation, and badly done at that: The translation being too far from the original, and the imitation too close to it.”³²

And yet who can seriously dispute that all these fears have come to pass? In this there is no point in engaging in fruitless disputations with “experts” who will point to this or that work of scholarship or art deemed exceptional. Certainly there have been achievements, but the exceptions do not make the Jewish state a formidable center of Jewish national culture, nor of any other culture for that matter. This is not a matter of taste, but of discernible fact, which can be determined by asking the question that Herzl would have asked: Does the cultural life of the Jewish state—its academia, art, science, literature, media, philosophy and law—does this culture *attract* the Jews of the world, inspiring and teaching them, drawing them nearer and in the end bringing them to live in the Jewish state? And the non-Jews—does the culture of Israel bring them to admire the achievements of the Jewish state as Germany and France were admired and imitated in years past, as America is admired and imitated today? The answer is self-evident. There is no evidence in support of such fantasies: On the contrary, the absence of the magnetic strength for which Herzl had hoped is palpable in virtually every field of intellectual and cultural endeavor. Israel is not attractive to Jews whose personal goals are primarily intellectual or cultural, nor do they make their way to the Jewish state to make it their homeland. On the contrary, such Jews *leave* Israel for Los Angeles or New York, Paris or London—as they are urged to do by a popular song played frequently on government radio, which reminds them: “In London there are more movies / In London there’s good music / In London there’s excellent television / In London people are more polite... / If you have to die like a dog / At least the television should be television.”³³

Indeed, the culture of the Jewish state is not attractive, but repulsive. From its historians obsessed with exposing the misdemeanors and crimes of the founders; to its artists with their ghastly assaults on traditional Jews and the defense forces; to the novelists fixated on the Arab claim to the land and the supposed immorality of the settlement movement; to a court system bent on duplicating Canadian legal institutions; to screenwriters and dramatists issuing one savage attack after another against the country’s heroes,

from Hannah Senesh to Yoni Netanyahu; to “philosophers” whose ruminations inevitably hit upon the fact that Zionism is a medusa, or that Judaism is a threat to the state, or that the defense forces are engaged in Nazism—the entire enterprise is so poisoned that it has no modes of operation other than “myth-smashing” and the aping of the foreigner. Israeli “culture” is a sewer of vandalism and self-loathing which is of no interest and attracts no one because it has nothing to offer other than the denigration of the past. It is repulsive *because* it is Post-Zionist.

What has so far escaped Israel’s culture-makers is the fact that a culture is powerful and attractive only to the degree that it has a *positive* ideal to offer; that true culture consists of creating myths, not destroying them. And it is only such a positive ideal, once it has proved itself capable of infusing an entire people with direction and meaning, which can then go on to inspire others and eventually become universal.³⁴ But what can our present-day Jewish nationalists, who have been so ready to deprecate Israel’s professorate and artists for their sickliness and failure—what can *they* offer in the way of such a constructive ideal to inspire the nation, much less universal truths? In the yeshivas it is a commonplace that all that is of grandeur, splendor and value is to be found in the Jewish tradition—and this may be so. But since hardly anyone ever ventures out from these self-absorbed worlds to attempt to describe his ideas in a way that Jews or gentiles might understand him, the question is largely moot. The culture of the yeshivas does not produce national history, books of philosophy, constitutional law, art, literature or anything else that can be understood by anyone other than a yeshiva student. Other than one fascinating adaptation of the last few years—yeshivas that have begun training cadets for the military’s elite combat units—the yeshiva nationalists are simply absent from the national culture.

As for a national culture beyond the yeshivas, one could point to a journal or two, a novelist or poet here and perhaps another there, and continue on in this way. But this is an absurdity, an exercise in politeness. The truth is that there is no Jewish national culture. More than a century after Ahad

Ha'am argued for the resurrection of the national spirit in the land of Israel, the national culture of the Jewish state remains an empty phrase, and the cultural center—a wasteland.

VII

No, the Jewish state is not powerful; it is perilously weak. Neither the materialism of Labor Zionism nor that of its religious-nationalist heirs was able to lay the foundations for a solid Jewish national idea among the Jews. The idea of the Jewish state does not move men of business, nor does it move men of culture; for a few years it moved men of religion, but this too is now in doubt. As a motivating idea, the Jewish state is emaciated and grows fainter with each passing year.

“No man is strong or wealthy enough to move a people,” Herzl wrote. “Only an idea can do that.” In *The Jewish State*, he tried to provide the Jews with such a motivating idea as best he was able, but they paid it little heed, devoting themselves instead to the “practical” work of building houses.³⁵ Even now, with the confusion and lack of purpose deepening from day to day for want of an idea, and with the questions accumulating in drifts and mounds until they threaten to reach the sky—Of what value is the Jewish nation today? What is its mission? What should be the nature of its institutions? What has it to contribute to mankind? What is to be gained by joining in its struggle? Why should one sacrifice on its behalf? Why should the Jewish state exist at all?—the Zionists continue to plod along with their masonry, oblivious, and it is doubtful whether they have produced even a single pamphlet since the founding of the state to try to provide answers.

“What is the alternative?” we have heard again and again, for years now—“the alternative to a Post-Zionist Israel?”

The intellectual and economic freedom of the individual—which today does not exist; a historic and religious rootedness in our ancient land—which today does not exist; and a positive Jewish national culture capable of enlightening our lives and serving as a beacon to mankind—which today does not exist. This is a philosophical program, a religious program, a political program; it is a program to create a home which will attract the Jews of the world to the Jewish state, in spirit and in body, and the gentiles as well. This is Jewish nationalism, the teaching of *The Jewish State*, one hundred years old this year.

Is this not the alternative which the Jewish people seeks?

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Notes

1. Yeshayahu Friedman, “Anti-Semitism on Behalf of Zionism,” *Ha’aretz*, February 16, 1996.

2. *Ma’ariv*, February 12 and February 19, 1996.

3. *Ha’aretz*, March 26, 1996. An accompanying piece was more positive; it sought to demonstrate that Herzl was not, as is commonly believed, entirely ignorant of Hebrew.

4. Tom Segev, “The First Post-Zionist,” *Ha’aretz*, April 3, 1996, p. B1.

5. The passage quoted is referring to the spirit of Herzl’s *Oldnewland*, but Elbaum-Dror makes it clear throughout the interview that she considers *Oldnewland* to be where Herzl expresses his actual opinions and “reveals himself in his true character.” “Herzl? Post-Zionist?” *Kol Ha’ir*, March 22, 1996.

6. *Ma’ariv Weekend*, November 29, 1996.

7. Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Herzl Press, 1970), p. 31.

8. Herzl, *The Jewish State*, p. 105.

9. Herzl, *The Jewish State*, pp. 48-49.

10. Herzl, *The Jewish State*, p. 50.

11. Herzl, *The Jewish State*, p. 105.

12. Herzl, *The Jewish State*, p. 61.

13. Herzl, *The Jewish State*, pp. 38-39.

14. Herzl, *The Jewish State*, pp. 71, 81.

15. Herzl, *The Jewish State*, p. 59.

16. Herzl used as examples Mecca in the Moslem world, and Lourdes and Trier among the Catholics. Herzl, *The Jewish State*, p. 88.

17. Jacques Kornberg, *Herzl: From Assimilation to Zionism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 178. The word “culture” does not appear in this context in *The Jewish State*, and the only example Herzl provides of the centers of “entertainment” he has in mind is a horse-racing track—which he describes as “a humorous example,” p. 85. In practice, Herzl’s political strategy was from the outset designed to build a coalition with businessmen and rabbis, and while he cannot have been accused of neglecting the recruitment of cultural figures, it is obvious that culture was in all respects a distant third in importance to him as a political factor after business and religion. It is interesting to note that Herzl was himself a playwright, and literary editor for one of the most prestigious newspapers in Europe, so that this undervaluing of the political importance of culture reflected his assessment of the relative relevance of his own profession.

18. Herzl, *The Jewish State*, p. 88. The entire section entitled “The Phenomenon of the Multitude” (pp. 84-88) is intended to deny the socialist tenets that vast financial handouts can induce the Jewish masses to move to Israel and stay there.

19. “For Europe we could constitute part of a wall of defense against Asia; we would serve as an outpost of civilization against barbarism.” Herzl, *The Jewish State*, p. 52.

20. Herzl, *The Jewish State*, p. 88.

21. Shabtai Teveth, *Ben-Gurion: The Burning Ground, 1886-1948* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 389. Compare Ben-Gurion’s views of these same “parasites” to Herzl’s, as explicated in a letter to one of the early proponents of farming settlements and “practical” Zionism: “[A]ll those engineers, architects, technicians, chemists, physicians, lawyers who emerged from the ghetto in the last thirty years.... All my love goes out to them. I want to see their breed multiply, unlike you who want to reduce it, because I see in them the inherent future strength of the Jews. They are, in other words, the likes of myself.” Letter to Baron Maurice de Hirsch, June 3, 1885, in Herzl, *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, Harry Zohn, trans., Raphael Patai, ed. (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960).

22. David Ben-Gurion, *Rebirth and Destiny of Israel*, trans. Mordekhai Nurock (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), p. 426.

23. Nurit Gretz, *Amos Oz: A Monograph* (Tel Aviv: Workers Library, 1981), p. 28.

24. *Ha'aretz*, August 13, 1995.

25. See Yoram Hazony, "The End of Zionism?" in *AZURE* 1 (Summer 1996), pp. 74-88.

26. Leon Wieseltier, "Isreality" in *The New Republic*, November 27, 1995, p. 12.

27. Fraiser Institute 1995 ratings, cited in *Yediot Aharonot*, January 16, 1996.

28. See, for example, Eliezer Schweid, "On the Substance and Background of Post-Zionism," *Gesher* 131 (Summer 1995), p. 22; Ya'akov Hisdai, "The Global Village vs. the National Home," *Ma'ariv*, October 3, 1995, p. 36; Moshe Shamir, "Is Hebrew Literature Still Zionist?" in *Nativ* 1/1989, p. 42.

29. For an elaboration of this position, see interview with Gershon Shaked, "The Empty Wagon Returns Fire" in *Yerushalayim*, January 19, 1996, p. 49.

30. Ya'akov Fleischmann, "Franz Rosenzweig as a Critic of Zionism," *Conservative Judaism*, Fall 1967, p. 65.

31. Herzl, *Complete Diaries*, February 23, 1896, vol. 1, p. 306.

32. Ahad Ha'am, "The Spiritual Revival," in Leon Simon, trans., *Selected Essays of Ahad Ha'am* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1912), p. 286.

33. Hava Alberstein, "London," from the album *London*, 1989.

34. Herzl understood this, and one of his first essays on Jewish nationalism, published in November 1896, argued that it was just such a Jewish-national ideal that had formed the basis for the "spiritual and intellectual environment in which so many generations before us survived," and that had provided "great strength, an inner unity which we have lost." A return to such an ideal, he concluded, was a necessary requirement not only for the continued survival of the Jewish nation, but also for the nation's ability to make a contribution to humanity: "A generation which has grown apart from Judaism does not have this [inner] unity; it can neither rely upon our past nor look to our future. That is why we shall once more retreat into Judaism and never again permit ourselves to be thrown out of this fortress.... First let us make this avowal and declare that we are Jews; only then will we take part in the troubles of others.... We, too, want to work for the improvement of conditions in the world, but we want to do it as Jews, not as persons of undefined identity.... Once we, too, have an ideal[,] like all the other nations, people will learn to respect us.... We shall thereby regain our lost inner wholeness and along with it a little character—our own character, not a Marrano-like, borrowed, untruthful character, but our own. And only then shall we vie with all other righteous people in justice, charity, and high-mindedness, only then shall we be

active on all fields of honor and try to advance in the arts and sciences.... This is how I understand Judaism.” Herzl, “Judaism,” in *Zionist Writings: Essays and Addresses*, Harry Zohn trans. (New York: Herzl Press, 1973), vol. 1, pp. 57-58. First published November 13, 1896.

35. The most recent expression of such exaggerated confidence in the redemptive capacity of the material is Ofir Haivry’s essay, “Act and Comprehend,” in *AZURE* 1 (Summer 1996), pp. 5-42.