

The Jewish State and Jewish Problem

By Ahad Ha'am

(1897)

These are extracts from a piece Ahad Ha'am wrote in frustration after the first Zionist Congress. 1856 1927) Born in Skvira, near Kiev in the Ukraine, Asher Ginsberg became the central figure in the movement for Cultural or Spiritual Zionism. Ahad Ha'am believed that the creation in Eretz-Israel of a Jewish cultural center would act to reinforce Jewish life in the Diaspora. His hope was that in this center a new Jewish national identity based on Jewish ethics and values might resolve the crisis of Judaism.

Ahad Ha'am critiques the motivation of the more assimilated Zionist in Western Europe. These Jews do not, as far as Ahad Ha'am sees it, care for their fellow Jew or for Jewish culture. They just wish for acceptance and romanticize how a Jewish State may bring some "normality".

Nordau's address on the general condition of the Jews was a sort of introduction to the business of the Congress. It exposed in incisive language the sore troubles, material or moral, which beset the Jews the world over. In Eastern countries [Poland, Russia, etc] their trouble is material: they have a constant struggle to satisfy the most elementary physical needs, to win a crust of bread and a breath of air -- things which are denied them because they are Jews. In the West, in lands of emancipation, their material condition is not particularly bad, but the moral trouble is serious: They want to take full advantage of their rights, and cannot; they long to become attached to the people of the country, and to take part in its social life, and they are kept at arm's length; they strive after love and brotherhood, and are met by looks of hatred and contempt on all sides; conscious that they are not inferior to their neighbors in any kind of ability or virtue, they have it continually thrown in their teeth that they are an inferior type, and are not fit to rise to the same level as the Aryans. And more to the same effect.

... The Western Jew, after leaving the Ghetto and seeking to attach himself to the people of the country in which he lives, is unhappy because his hope of an open-armed welcome is disappointed. He returns reluctantly to his own people, and tries to find within the Jewish community that life for which he yearns -- but in vain. Communal life and communal problems no longer satisfy him. He has already grown accustomed to a broader social and political life; and on the intellectual side Jewish cultural work has no attraction, because Jewish culture has played no part in his education from childhood, and is a closed book to him. So in his trouble he turns to the land of his ancestors, and pictures to himself how good it would be if a Jewish State were re-established there -- a State



arranged and organized exactly after the pattern of other States. Then he could live a full, complete life among his own people, and find at home all that he now sees outside, dangled before his eyes, but out of reach. Of course, not all the Jews will be able to take wing and go to their State; but the very existence of the Jewish State will raise the prestige of those who remain in exile, and their fellow citizens will no more despise them and keep them at arm's length, as though they were ignoble slaves, dependent entirely on the hospitality of others...

This is the basis of Western Zionism and the secret of its attraction. But Eastern *Chibbath Zion* has a different origin and development... at the very time when the material tragedy in the East was at its height, the heart of the Eastern Jew was still oppressed by another tragedy -- the moral one...

The Eastern form of the moral trouble is absolutely different from the Western. **In the West it is the problem of the Jews, in the East the problem of Judaism.** The one weighs on the individual, the other on the nation. The one is felt by Jews who have had a European education, the other by Jews whose education has been Jewish. **The one is a product of anti-Semitism, and is dependent on anti-Semitism for its existence;** the other is a natural product of a real link with a culture of thousands of years, which will retain its hold even if the troubles of the Jews all over the world come to an end, together with anti-Semitism, and all the Jews in every land have comfortable positions, are on the best possible terms with their neighbors, and are allowed by them to take part in every sphere of social and political life on terms of absolute equality.

It is not only Jews who have come out of the Ghetto: Judaism has come out, too. For Jews the exodus is confined to certain 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 with modern culture overturns the defences of Judaism from within, so that Judaism can no longer remain isolated and live a life apart. The spirit of our people strives for development: it wants to absorb those elements of general culture which reach it from outside, to digest them and to make them a part of itself, as it has done before at different periods of its history. But the conditions of its life in exile are not suitable. In our time culture wears in each country the garb of the national spirit, and the stranger who would woo her must sink his individuality and become absorbed in the dominant spirit. For this reason Judaism in exile cannot develop its individuality in its own way. When it leaves the Ghetto walls it is in danger of losing its essential being or -- at best -- its national unity: it is in danger of being split up into as many kinds of Judaism, each with a different character and life, as there are countries of the Jewish dispersion.

Should Zionism be driven by anti-semitism or by Jewish culture?

Has Judaism been "unable to develop its individuality in its own way" in the Diaspora?

Have the freedoms of North American life endangered our national unity?



Does Israel breathe new life into Jewish communities in the diaspora?

Does Israel "preserve their unity"?

And here the politics begin...

And now Judaism... seeks to return to its historic center, in order to live there a life of natural development, to bring its powers into play in every department of human culture, to develop and perfect those national possessions which it has acquired up to now, and thus to contribute to the common stock of humanity, in the future as in the past, a great national culture, the fruit of the unhampered activity of a people living according to its own spirit. For this purpose Judaism needs at present but little. It needs not an independent State, but only the creation in its native land of conditions favorable to its development: a good-sized settlement of Jews working *without hindrance*¹ in every branch of culture, from agriculture and handicrafts to science and literature. This Jewish settlement... will become in course of time the center of the nation... then from this center the spirit of Judaism will go forth to the great circumference, to all the communities of the Diaspora, and will breathe new life into them and preserve their unity; and when our national culture in Palestine has attained that level, we may be confident that it will produce men in the country who will be able, on a favorable opportunity, to establish a State which will be a Jewish State, and not merely a State of Jews.

...Almost all our great men, those, that is, whose education and social position fit them to be at the head of a Jewish State, are spiritually far removed from Judaism, and have no true conception of its nature and its value... in the end the Jewish State will be a State of Germans or Frenchmen of the Jewish race. We have even now a small example of this process in Palestine. And history teaches us that in the days of the Herodian house Palestine was indeed a Jewish State, but the national culture was despised and persecuted, and the ruling house did everything in its power to implant Roman culture in the country, and frittered away the national resources in the building of heathen temples and amphitheatres and so forth. Such a Jewish State would spell death and utter degradation for our people. We should never achieve sufficient political power to deserve respect, while we should miss the living moral force within. The puny State, being "tossed about like a ball between its powerful neighbors, and maintaining its existence only by diplomatic shifts and continual truckling to the favored of fortune," would not be able to give us a feeling of national glory; and the national culture, in which we might have sought and found our glory, would not have been implanted in our State and would not be the principle of its life. So we should really be then -- much more than we are now -- "a small and insignificant nation," enslaved in spirit to "the favored of fortune," turning an envious and covetous eye on the armed force of our "powerful neighbors" and our existence as a sovereign State would not add a glorious chapter to our national history.

If it were really the aim of "Zionism" to bring the people back to Judaism -- to make it not merely a nation in the political sense, but a nation living according to its own spirit -- then the Congress would not have postponed questions of national

It turns out that arguments about "presenting a united front" did not begin in the 21st Century!

culture -- of language and literature, of education and the diffusion of Jewish knowledge -- to the very last moment, after the end of all the debates on *rechtlich* and *völkerrechtlich*, on the election of X. as a member of the Committee, on the imaginary millions, and so forth. When all those present were tired out, and welcomed the setting sun on the last day as a sign of the approaching end, a short time was allowed for a discourse by one of the members on all those important questions, which are in reality the most vital and essential questions. Naturally, the discourse, however good, had to be hurried and shortened; there was no time for discussion of details; a suggestion was made from the platform that all these problems should be handed over to a Commission consisting of certain writers, who were named; and the whole assembly agreed simply for the sake of finishing the business and getting away.

The whole Congress, too, was designed rather as a demonstration to the world than as a means of making it clear to ourselves what we want and what we can do. The founders of the movement wanted to show the outside world that they had behind them a united and unanimous Jewish people... The Order of Proceedings, which was sent out with the invitation to the Congress, said merely in general terms that anybody could be a delegate "who expresses his agreement with the general programme of Zionism," without explaining what the general programme was or where it could be found. Thus there met at Basle men utterly at variance with one another in their views and aspirations. They thought in their simplicity that everybody whose gaze was turned Zion-wards, though he did not see eye to eye, with Herzl, had done his duty to the general programme and had a right to be a member of the Congress and to express his views before it. But the heads of the Congress tried with all their might to prevent any difference of opinion on fundamental questions from coming to the surface, and used every "parliamentary" device to avoid giving opportunity for discussion and elucidation of such questions... many delegates quite failed to notice the wide gulf between the various views on points of principle, and a discussion on any such point was calculated to open people's eyes and to shatter the whole structure to atoms. But such discussions were not raised, because even the few who saw clearly and understood the position shrank from the risk of "wrecking." And so the object was attained; the illusion of unanimity was preserved till the last; the outside world saw a united people demanding a State; and those who were inside returned home full of enthusiasm, but no whit the clearer as to their ideas or the relation of one idea to another.

Source: Translated from the Hebrew by Leon Simon c 1912, Jewish Publication Society of America, [Essential Texts of Zionism](#)

