

INTRODUCTION

The First Zionist Congress and Jewish History

HOBBS, HERZL, AND THE PREHISTORY OF ZIONISM

The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 culminated the campaign for a Jewish polity that had begun at the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897. In comparing Zionism with other nationalist movements, the inauspiciousness of its circumstances stands out, since Jews did not have the usual foundations (i.e., a common land and common language) upon which to erect a nation-state.¹ The absence of these elements is thrown into sharp relief by observing that the drive to establish a Jewish state in Palestine, the principal language of which would be Hebrew, was inaugurated at a conference held in Switzerland, where the debates were conducted in German. Perhaps because of the enormous distance Zionism had to traverse to reach its goal, its history evokes, much more than other modern ventures in state-making, the conditions posited by Thomas Hobbes in his philosophical treatise, *Leviathan*.

Hobbes argued that the origins of the state are to be found in human fear and desire. Fear is primary: “Fear of oppression, disposeth a man to anticipate, or to seek aid by society: for there is no other way by which a man can secure his life and liberty.” But this “seeking aid by society,” which multiplies exponentially the power of the individual and gives rise to the relative security of the commonwealth, is grounded in positive human desires as well. Among them are the desires for “ease and sensual delight,” but also and more significantly for honor and dignity. Desire for the latter constitutes the key to explaining the peculiar behavior of human beings, since they, unlike other social animals, “are continually in competition for honour and dignity . . . and consequently amongst men there ariseth on that ground, envy and hatred, and finally war.” Honor in such a world is derived from a reputation for power, without respect to the justness of the actions producing this reputation: thus, “honour consisteth

only in the opinion of power.” And because “the greatest of human powers, is that compounded of the powers of most men, united by consent,” the sovereignty embodied in the state is worthy of supreme honor. “And as the power, so also the honour of the sovereign, ought to be greater, than that of any, or all the subjects. For in the sovereignty is the fountain of honour.”²

Hobbes supplies a theoretical entree into Zionism as the product of Jews’ justifiable fear and actual experience of oppression, as well as the historically conditioned desire to recover Jewish honor through the establishment of a nation-state. And if we accept Hobbes’s declaration that honor consists in “the opinion of power,” it becomes clear why Theodor Herzl is esteemed the founder of Zionism.³ For Herzl it was who established Zionism as an overtly political movement in search of a Jewish sovereignty, proposing, organizing, and presiding over the First Zionist Congress in 1897, in Basel, Switzerland; and who then exercised a Caesar-like dominance over the growing movement for the remainder of his short life. For the 1897 Congress was no isolated event. On the contrary, its participants elected an executive tasked to carry on propaganda, recruitment, fund-raising, data-gathering, etc., after the Congress adjourned; it set in train a series of Congresses, which met twenty-two times prior to Israel’s independence in 1948, and continued to meet thereafter (the thirty-seventh Zionist Congress took place in October 2015); and it inspired the proliferation of groups affiliated to the Zionist Organization, whereby the whole movement exerted increasing influence on Jews, especially in Europe and North America.⁴ Moreover, a proper historical treatment of Herzl’s movement must also recognize that “Congress-Zionism” folded into its agenda, besides (1) the quest for autonomy or statehood, both (2) the development of a modern Hebrew culture, and (3) the support of ongoing Jewish immigration to and settlement in Palestine—even if Herzl regarded the latter two endeavors as peripheral to, even subversive of, his political project.⁵ Nevertheless, these other, non-Hobbesian strands of Zionism existed before Herzl, and to appreciate the innovation represented by his Congress-Zionism, one must see it against the background of its antecedents.

Hope for the restoration of the Jews to Palestine is a motif in the preaching of the biblical prophets, and synagogue liturgy has included prayers for the ingathering of the exiles and the rebuilding of Jerusalem since ancient times. The pronounced secularism of most Zionists notwithstanding, it would be absurd to suggest that this religious aspiration did not influence the formation of the Zionist program. Nevertheless, Jews praying for a “return” to the Holy Land were not *eo ipso* Zionists, and there was dogmatic opposition from among Orthodox Jews to the three strands of Zionism identified above. The settlement of Jews in

Palestine for the sake of economic productivity and social transformation clashed with traditions, which made that land the destination of pilgrims and scholars of Torah who lived on the charity of their Diaspora brethren; the de-consecration of Hebrew, making it a quotidian means of communication, and the creation of a secular Hebrew culture, were controversial; and the inherently humanistic and dialectical character of political Zionism stood in seemingly irreconcilable conflict with an eschatology in which God would, unilaterally and miraculously, through the agency of his Messiah, restore the Jews to the land, or, to use the biblical idiom, accomplish the Redemption of Israel.

There had been agitation prior to the rise of Zionism for a revision of this traditional eschatology, a movement sometimes termed “active messianism” because it assigned to human agency a pivotal role in producing conditions necessary for the Redemption to occur. This agitation seems to have generated a modest increase in Jews moving to Palestine in the 1700s and 1800s. A leading figure in this school of thought was Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer of Toruń (Thorn), in German-ruled Poland, who stood firmly within the received tradition as a scholar of the Talmud, yet interpreted the prophecies of Israel’s restoration to imply that there would be “a natural beginning of the Redemption,” (i.e., a gradual ingathering of Jews into Palestine), supported by philanthropy and secured by diplomacy. In a work published in Hebrew in 1862, *Derishat Zion* (“Seeking Zion”), Kalischer answered Orthodox critics of this scheme by propounding the harmony of charitable support for Torah scholars with the projected establishment of new agricultural settlements by Jews. He argued that contributions from such enterprises would augment the meager income of Torah scholars, allowing them to continue to serve God through their exclusive devotion to worship and study; meanwhile, Jewish farmers would gain merit by fulfilling the Torah’s commandments pertaining to agriculture.⁶ Kalischer’s ideas helped to convince some of Europe’s most influential Orthodox rabbis (e.g., Hirsch Hildesheimer of Berlin) to support immediate Jewish settlement in Palestine. Kalischer also helped establish a society for Jewish colonization and obtained funding for an agricultural institute, which the Alliance Israélite Universelle, a non-Zionist aid and advocacy association, set up in Jaffa.⁷ Fusing Orthodox Judaism and a kind of proto-Zionism, it is perhaps not surprising that Kalischer’s work adumbrates themes that reappear in the hybrid ideology of religious Zionism: the Torah as the basis of the national renaissance; the acquisition and cultivation of land in Palestine in order to fulfill commands of the Torah; the compatibility of charity to support Torah study with creative labor as the basis for national regeneration; settlement and statehood as steps

toward the full and final Redemption; the unique and essentially religious nationhood of Israel and its divinely determined connection to the land.⁸

But, from a wider perspective, the circumstances and worldviews within which “mainstream” Zionism took its rise were profoundly different from those which shaped this “active” yet still essentially traditional messianism. David Engel helpfully differentiates the two movements on the basis of several criteria, but above all by characterizing the chronologically earlier one as eschatological and therefore consistent with Jewish doctrines of election and covenant, while the later movement was non- or even anti-eschatological, since it implied, and sometimes openly declared, a repudiation of divine election, proclaiming as its goal the “normalization” of Jewish life, whether economically by turning the Jews into farmers and laborers, or politically by organizing them into a nation-state like other nation-states.⁹ Arthur Hertzberg gives a lucid statement of the distinction: “What marks modern Zionism as a fresh beginning in Jewish history is that its ultimate values derive from the general milieu. The Messiah is now identified with the dream of an age of individual liberty, national freedom, and economic and social justice—i.e., with the progressive faith of the nineteenth century.”¹⁰

Since most European states really did see progress in terms of their protection of individual liberties and the establishment of legal equality, proto-Zionist schemes had little purchase among most Jews for most of the nineteenth century. An 1870 editorial in the influential Jewish journal *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* reflects this sanguine temper, predominant among *Westjuden* (Jews of Western Europe), but widespread among *Ostjuden* (Jews of Eastern Europe) as well.¹¹

The author of this article, titled “Unser Jahrhundert” [Our Century], acknowledges the reversals suffered by movements favoring liberal and egalitarian political change, noting that the French Revolution gave way to Napoleonic despotism and that the revolutions of 1848 were defeated by the forces of political reaction. In the religious sphere, the re-establishment of the Jesuits, the assertion of papal infallibility, and the muzzling of Reform Judaism by an ossified Jewish Orthodoxy are cited as victories for bigotry and obscurantism. Yet the author has an unshakeable confidence in the future. He concludes by declaring that the real spirit of the times is expressed in the tendency toward a new moral earnestness, the expansion of citizens’ rights and freedoms, international treaties and agreements, and associations for peace, and not in governments’ manipulation of the populace by means of an “artificially awakened national identity.” The problems of the century are to be regarded as a vast

process of fermentation, in which elements of the past are being fused with the ideas of the present. But progress has been substantial and is seen in the normalizing of political and social values that were once unimaginable: the equality of rights of citizens throughout western Europe, without respect to religion; the recent abolition of serfdom in Russia and slavery in the United States; and a newfound legal equality even among different “races.” It is easy in retrospect to deride the author’s facile faith in the future, but his argument

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Inhalt.

Leitende Artikel: Unser Jahrhundert. — Die Reisation der israelitischen Synode zu Leipzig. — Abhandlungen verschiedener Inbalt.

Zeitungsnachrichten: Deutschland: Berlin. — Oesterreich: ungarische Monarchie: Wien, Pest. — Frankreich: Paris.

Genüßten-Beilage: Gebete während des Krieges. IX. und X. — Ein Erbproceß in Algier. (Schluß). — Correspondenz.

Und wieder aus den Fingern entwichen werde. Das vorige Jahrhundert hat gekämpft, was es gewollt, und was es wollte, vollbracht. Es wollte die Fesseln brechen, welche die letzten Jahrhunderte aus dem Mittelalter heraus in ihrer Weise geschmiebet hatten, und zur Freiheit kommen, die Fesseln der Unwissenheit und Geschmackslosigkeit, der Steifheit und Kleingeisterei, des Aberglaubens und der kirchlichen Verunsicherung, des Schulpedantismus und der Unbildung, der politischen und socialen Knechtung. Und alle diese Fesseln brach es nach fortwährendem Kämpfen und Ringen gegen Ende wirklich: in der Wissenschaft (wir erinnern nur an Laplace und Kant, in den Künsten durch Kritik und classische Schöpfungen, in der Pädagogik durch Rousseau bis Pestalozzi und auf dem großen Gebiete des politischen und socialen Lebens durch die französische Revolution. Wir haben hier einen Gedanken, ein Streben, eine That. So mannigfaltig auch die Geister, so verschieden die Tendenzen, so häufig die Ausschreitungen: in der Tiefe war es eine und dieselbe Richtung, die von Allen verfolgt wurde, und dadurch wurde das Ziel erreicht. Nichts dergleichen in unserem Jahrhundert. Sehen wir es uns ein wenig näher an.

Mit dem Beginne desselben errichtete Napoleon seinen ungeheuerlichen Thron auf den Trümmern der französischen Republik und vieler alter Reiche, strebte, die alte Idee einer Universalmonarchie zu erneuern, und ließ die revolutionäre Freiheit in einen unerträglichen Despotismus ausgehen. Zwei neue Revolutionen folgten

Leitende Artikel.

Bonn, 4. September.

Unser Jahrhundert.

Es wird ein räthselreiches Jahrhundert sein für den zukünftigen Geschichtsforscher, dieses 19. Jahrhundert. Die Wirrsale der widersprechendsten Erscheinungen werden vor ihm stehen, Deutung und Erklärung verlangen und in ihrer bunten Mannigfaltigkeit fast unmöglich machen. Dieses Jahrhundert der Wiederherstellung der Jesuiten und der päpstlichen Unschicklichkeit, des napoleonischen Despotismus am Anfang und in der Mitte auf dem Boden unaufhörlicher Bewegungen und Erschütterungen, erfüllt von den entgegengegesetzten Gestaltungen, wird als so sonderbar und wunderlich, so außergewöhnlich und in einem Gemisch von Licht und Dunkelheit erscheinen, daß der Denker verzweifeln wird, einen leitenden Faden zu finden, der ihm nicht jeden Augen-

FIGURE I.1. “Unser Jahrhundert,” leader in *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums*, September 13, 1870. DigitaleSammlungen/Compact Memory, Goethe University, Frankfurt.

was plausible in its context and represents very neatly the historical optimism to which most European Jews subscribed.¹²

For this reason, surveys of events supposedly antecedent to Zionism tend to overestimate the importance of the many stillborn projects for conveying Jews to Palestine, concocted by both Jews and non-Jews prior to the 1880s. Richard Gottheil's diffuse essay on Zionism in the *Jewish Encyclopaedia* of 1906 catalogues a multitude of these schemes, featuring such famous personalities as Napoleon Bonaparte, Lord Shaftesbury, Henry Dunant, Laurence Oliphant, Benjamin Disraeli, and George Eliot, alongside lesser lights such as Mordecai Noah, Abraham Pétavel, Moritz Steinschneider, Joseph Salvador, and Benedetto Musolino. It was perhaps Gottheil's attempt to demonstrate that such plans were an element of the zeitgeist, that the idea was in the air and awaiting realization. Nevertheless, as late as the 1870s, despite a plethora of proposals, general Jewish interest in the subject was almost nil. A Jewish reviewer of Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* suggests that "an imponderable mass of indefinite feelings and vague impulses" might one day motivate Jews to seek to re-establish themselves in Palestine, but there is scant evidence for any nationalist ferment in response to these plans. It was going to take more than "indefinite feelings and vague impulses" to set the Jewish masses in motion.¹³

LEON PINSKER AND THE JEWS UNDER THE TSARS

The first important communal manifestation of Hertzberg's "fresh beginning in Jewish history" occurred rather in the 1880s, when, as a result of persecution and want—in particular the unusually widespread and tacitly tolerated pogroms of 1881 in Russia—Russian and Romanian Jews began to settle in Palestine in small but appreciable numbers.

This spurt of immigration is known as the First Aliya, "Aliya" meaning an "ascent" (recalling the ascent of pilgrims who went "up to Jerusalem" in biblical times), and "First" because the settlers arriving during this time were retrospectively assimilated to later, ordinally designated immigration flows in Israeli historiography (hence, Second Aliya, Third Aliya, etc.). The immigrants of the 1880s and 90s were themselves distinct from traditional Jewish immigrants to Palestine—the pilgrims and Torah scholars—not because they were irreligious (most were observant Jews) but rather because, ostensibly, many were seeking to become economically independent (e.g., by acquiring land and forming agricultural colonies.)¹⁴ Frequently deprived of access to the



FIGURE I.2. Jaffa, port of entry for most European immigrants to Palestine, 1890s. Lenkin Family Collection, Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies Library, University of Pennsylvania.

productive, especially the agricultural, sectors of the economy in countries of their birth, immigrants of the First Aliya aimed to set up farms and other enterprises, which would make them basic producers, believing this would break patterns of Jewish “parasitism,” regenerate their moral character, and lead to a national revival. Thus, Ahad Ha’am, the Russian-Jewish essayist, described Eretz Israel as answering

the need to create a fixed center for ourselves by settling a large mass of our brethren in one place on the basis of working the land, so that both Israel and its enemies will know that there is one place under the heavens . . . where a Jew can raise his head like any other person, earning his bread from the land, by the sweat of his brow, and creating his own national spirit—if this need has any hope of being fulfilled, it is only in Eretz Israel.¹⁵

The immigrants’ goal was a radical break with the existing habitus among Jews: “[T]heir intent is to change their entire way of life, to transform themselves from merchants into workers of the soil . . .”¹⁶



FIGURE I.3. Jewish farmers in Palestine, 1890s. Lenkin Family Collection, Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies Library, University of Pennsylvania.

It should be added that the First Aliya coincides with a massive outflow of Jews from Russia, Russian Poland, and Romania, mainly directed toward Western Europe and North America, not Palestine. For these Jews, it was economic hardship, not a vision to transform Jewish character, that impelled their emigration.¹⁷

If emigration from the East was the major practical response to the pogroms in Russia, the principal theoretical response came in the form of a pamphlet titled *Autoemancipation* by Leon Pinsker. It was a landmark in the development of Zionist thought, not only because of its content but because of the position of its author. Pinsker was a proudly Russified Jew, a respected physician, educated in Russian universities and with a record of distinguished service to the Tsarist regime. Prior to the appearance of his booklet, he shared the widespread belief, attested in the 1870 article cited above, that Russia would follow the path of Western European states and ultimately emancipate (i.e., grant legal equality to) its Jews. Based on this optimistic assessment of Russia's future, he had campaigned for Jewish assimilation in Russia. But the

pogroms convinced him, as it did vast numbers of other Jews, including especially many middle-class and semi-assimilated Jews, that the hope of winning equality with other Russians was illusory.¹⁸ Given the events of 1881, in which even the Russian intelligentsia had taken a hand, such disillusionment was only natural. However, Pinsker's "manifesto," as Shlomo Avineri terms it, presented a bolder thesis, i.e., that anti-Semitism was an "ethnological" or even pathological condition affecting all peoples and not just Russians. Avineri rightly judges Pinsker's quasi-medical diagnosis of the cause of anti-Semitism to be reductionist and unconvincing. Yet its very reductionism is a sign that Pinsker felt he was dealing with something elemental in human nature. The apparent universality, persistence, and irrationality of Jew-hatred suggested to him that anti-Semitism was a phenomenon not dependent on the existence of a particular set of material or social conditions.¹⁹ And if this were so, then a purely legal remedy such as emancipation could never abolish it; in fact, emancipation bestowed from without was an operative admission that the Jew was not accepted as a social equal.²⁰ And although Pinsker was wrong in asserting that anti-Semitism could be explained as a species of hereditary pathology,²¹ he was right in perceiving that it was generated by powerful, contradictory impulses that were not readily amenable to legislated reforms or rational persuasion.

This fundamentally similar aversion exists everywhere and always, regardless of whether it is manifested in deeds of violence or vicious jealousy, or masked as tolerance and protection. To be plundered as a Jew or to need protection as a Jew is equally humiliating, equally offensive to the Jews' sense of human dignity. . . . For the living, the Jew is a dead man, for the natives a foreigner, for the locals a vagrant, for the propertied elements a beggar, for the poor an exploiter and millionaire, for patriots a man without a country, for all classes a hated competitor.²²

While Pinsker dismissed the fallacious accusations of the anti-Semites, he did not ascribe Gentile hostility toward the Jews solely to ignorance and prejudice. The Jews were held in contempt also because they *were* contemptible, behaving like herd animals, without dignity or solidarity, absorbed only with the need to escape from immediate danger. For Pinsker, this deficiency of character could be remedied only by a radical change in Jewish consciousness and conditions. Jews had first to give up the chimera of seeking equal rights as individuals in the states where they lived: in a world of ethno-national states, individual rights could be secured only by citizenship in an ethno-national state possessing sovereignty. So Jews had to recognize that communal solidarity

took precedence over an egoistical quest for individual safety; they had to be transformed from a “scattered herd” into a national community.²³ To fully realize that goal, they would have to relocate and concentrate themselves in a single territory where they would eventually acquire sovereignty. For Pinsker himself, alienated as he was from Jewish religious tradition, that territory did not have to be Palestine; the only criteria that mattered were the land’s accessibility, security, and productivity.²⁴

The First Aliya began in 1881; Pinsker’s pamphlet appeared in 1882. To a great extent, both were effects of the same cause; i.e., the pogroms in Russia triggered by the assassination of Tsar Alexander II.²⁵ Interestingly, Pinsker hoped his *Mahnruf*, or “cry of warning” (as he subtitled his pamphlet), would provoke a response not only among Jews in Russia, but even more among Western Jews, whom he thought had the talent, freedom, and resources to realize his program—which explains why he wrote in German. He was to be disappointed. Most Western Jews rejected his arguments, regarding *Autoemancipation* as myopic and reactionary. It ignored the astonishing progress made by Jews outside Russia, a progress taken to be irreversible since it was based on “objective” forces; and, for religious liberals, the summons to establish a Jewish nation-state threatened to destroy modern Judaism’s sublime spirituality for the sake of an obsolete political identity.²⁶ As was to be the case with Herzl, Pinsker found his most receptive audience among his fellow *Ostjuden*, especially in Russia, especially those already coalescing into proto-Zionist colonization societies, which went under various names but which are lumped together under the Hebrew rubric *Hovevei Zion* (“Lovers of Zion”). Pinsker was prevailed upon to assume the presidency of a committee to coordinate the activities of these societies, to raise funds to help the existing colonists, as well as to promote further settlement in Palestine. The founding conference of Hovevei Zion took place under his leadership, at Kattowitz (Katowice) in German-ruled Poland, in 1884; there were about thirty delegates in attendance.²⁷

The relationship between the First Aliya and Hovevei Zion was loose; as happened later with Congress-Zionism, European campaigning and fundraising were often separate and distinct from the actual immigration and settlement taking place in Palestine. On the whole, Zionist agitation in Europe tended to support and enhance colonization that was occurring spontaneously, or at least independently of any central directorate. But in the case of Hovevei Zion, such support was so slender that many of the colonies established by First Aliya immigrants were saved from collapse only by the intervention of Baron Edmond de Rothschild, a French Jew and scion of the greatest banking dynasty in Europe.²⁸



FIGURE I.4. Baron Edmond de Rothschild, ca. 1905. Reproduced with the permission of the Trustees of The Rothschild Archive.

But the lack of external assistance was not the only or even the main problem. Ahad Ha'am's report on his visit to Palestine in 1891 reveals serious misconceptions and moral failings endemic to the new *Yishuv*, as the recently established settler colony was known, that had created the crisis to which the Baron responded. Among these were false notions about the ready availability of fertile land and false characterizations of the Arabs as lazy, inefficient, and naïve.²⁹ The new immigrants had fantasies of easy riches in what was imagined to be “a new California,” and a concomitant aversion to hard physical labor. A deplorable disunity and lack of discretion characterized the various Jewish associations seeking to buy land and plant colonies in Palestine.³⁰ Finally, there was the hostility of the Ottoman government. Although that hostility was never insuperable, it

did complicate efforts to purchase land and put up buildings, since subterfuges and bribery were necessary to circumvent Ottoman regulations.³¹

So, on the one hand, Pinsker had argued that the Jewish problem could be solved only by Jews establishing their own state. On the other hand, most settlers of the First Aliya did not have statehood in view; and Pinsker himself soon recognized that such an aspiration—given the pathetic resources of his constituency, combined with Ottoman resistance to any such scheme—was completely implausible.³² In the end, this financial incapacity, coupled with the political timidity and organizational incohesiveness of Hovevei Zion, convinced many of its followers to join the new Congress-Zionism of Herzl.³³ Nevertheless, Hovevei Zion paved the way for Herzl by creating a network of activists, particularly among the *Ostjuden*, committed to finding a national solution to the Jewish question. By means of its propaganda, Hovevei Zion contributed to the creation of a self-consciously Jewish public which believed in the viability and legitimacy of the new Jewish settlement in Palestine, even if most members of that public never emigrated there themselves.³⁴

THEODOR HERZL'S MOMENT

Herzl deserves credit for reinventing Zionism, but not by means of new arguments. Herzl acknowledged that he had said nothing new in his famous booklet *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*), which appeared in 1896 and was composed *before* he read Pinsker's pamphlet or made any detailed assessment of the ongoing work of colonization.³⁵ But if there was little difference between Herzl's booklet and Pinsker's in terms of content, the difference in context was large. The years 1882–1896 witnessed a resurgence of anti-Semitic politics in Western and Central Europe. The movement had begun to gain strength prior to the 1880s, the term “anti-Semitism” having been popularized by a pamphlet published in 1879 alleging that Jews, representing “Semitism,” were triumphing over “Germanism.”³⁶ While a pseudo-scientific racialism underlay this argument, the advance of anti-Semitism in the 1880s and 1890s was a result not only of the popularization of racist ideology but even more of its utility in mobilizing electorates to vote for political groupings opposed to secular-liberal policies and, especially, against social-democratic parties adhering to Marxian principles, since Jews were at the forefront of both these political tendencies. Confusingly, some reactionary, anti-Semitic parties also designated themselves as “socialist,” albeit always with a qualifier (“Christian,” “German,” “National,”

etc.).³⁷ The political-economic logic of uniting anti-Semitism with so-called socialism derived from a belief that, because Jews controlled much industrial and financial capital, anti-Semitic measures, by curtailing their influence, would ease the plight of independent tradespeople, factory workers, shopkeepers, and peasants, who were hit hardest by the advance of large-scale production and commerce. Hence the denigration of anti-Semitism as the “socialism of the stupid,” especially among Germany’s Social Democrats.³⁸

Organized anti-Semitism in Germany was manifested in the holding of an anti-Semitic Congress in 1886 in Cassel; in 1892 there were anti-Semitic outbreaks as a consequence of inflammatory pamphlets authored by the proto-Hitlerian demagogue Hermann Ahlwardt, whose wild allegations were often seconded by the Catholic press. German Conservatives saw in Ahlwardt’s demagoguery the means of defeating Liberals and Social Democrats, and they therefore formulated a platform in which they pledged themselves to “combat the oppressive and disintegrating Jewish influence on our national life.” German anti-Semitism was exported to Austria, and two anti-Semitic leagues were founded there as early as 1882. In the 1890s, a coalition of Christian Socialists and anti-Semites gained the ascendancy in Austrian politics; in 1895, Karl Lueger, an outspoken anti-Semite, was elected mayor of Vienna by the municipal council. In France, Édouard Drumont founded an anti-Semitic league in 1889, and the formal degradation of Captain Alfred Dreyfus on the basis of forged documents proved that Jews were not secure even where they had first been emancipated. Herzl covered the Dreyfus case as a journalist and was no doubt affected by it, although it appears that the deteriorating political situation in his native Austria-Hungary, especially in Vienna, was a more powerful impulse in turning him toward “Zionism.”³⁹

Actually, Herzl did not coin the “ism” with which his life and thought have become so completely identified. Surprisingly, *Judenstaat* never uses the term. It refers to “Zionists” once and uses the adjective “Zionist” twice, but the terms are employed to disparage projects to colonize Palestine, which Herzl regarded as regressive due to their dependence on philanthropy, their focus on agriculture, and their lack of an overarching plan and political goal. How then did he come to adopt this term as the name for his movement? The Vienna context is again crucial. Around 1882, Jewish students organized a fraternity they called “Kadimah”; the Hebrew word means both “eastward” and “forward,” thus suggesting both the students’ pride in their ethno-national origins *and* their commitment to secular-progressive values.⁴⁰ Seeking to uphold the honor of Jews at the university in Vienna, the society was made up mostly

of immigrants from Russia, many of whom had ties to Pinsker and Hovevei Zion. But the leader of the society was the Vienna-born Nathan Birnbaum, who published a journal with a title cribbed from Pinsker, *Selbst-Emancipation*. In 1890, Birnbaum published an article in which he used *Zionismus* as a neologism for Jewish nationalism, the term implying an acceptance of the Palestine orientation of Hovevei Zion (“Zion” synecdochic for Palestine) but demanding that priority be given to political action, as Pinsker’s pamphlet had suggested. Birnbaum’s group responded enthusiastically to *Judenstaat* when it was published in 1896, inviting Herzl to meet with them; Herzl soon appropriated *Zionismus* to designate his own ideology, because the term had already gained this new political connotation and because the “Zionists” were his most eager proselytizers.⁴¹ Although personal frictions soon developed between Herzl and Birnbaum—Birnbaum resented Herzl’s taking over as leader—they were alike in seeking to draw Jews into a Jewish political-national movement, as the only truly effective response to the new anti-Semitism.⁴²

If this new anti-Semitism was important in magnifying Herzl’s impact, so was his personality and leadership. Herzl differed from Pinsker in the energy he devoted to the cause; it should be remembered that Pinsker was sixty-three at the time of the Kattowitz Conference; Herzl organized the Basel Congress when he was just thirty-seven.⁴³ In taking over the Zionist movement, Herzl transformed it into a self-avowedly pan-Jewish, institutionally ramified, quasi-parliamentarian movement, under the direction of an elected executive. Before Herzl, Zionism had meant, mostly, resisting assimilation, encouraging small-scale settlement in Palestine, and reviving the use of Hebrew as a vernacular.⁴⁴ While it is erroneous to suggest that Herzl was the first to propose a nation-state for Jews—as we have seen, he was preceded by Pinsker, as well as several others⁴⁵—Herzl’s iteration of Zionism imparted to it a new status and momentum. The 1897 Congress and its successors gained for Jewish nationalism an international stature, and at the Congresses delegates envisioned grand financial and diplomatic initiatives that would open the way to statehood. These initiatives involved mobilizing vast quantities of capital from Jews all over the world in order to build proto-state institutions, as well as winning legal protection for ongoing settlement with a view to the ultimate attainment of sovereignty.⁴⁶ Under Herzl’s leadership, the Zionist Organization began to publish its official weekly organ, *Die Welt*, to disseminate its views to the Jewish public; it established the Jewish Colonial Trust (1899), the Zionist bank; and it launched the Jewish National Fund (1901), to finance the acquisition of lands in Palestine that were to remain the common possession of the Jewish people in perpetuity.⁴⁷

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Halbjährig 3 fl. = 6 Kr.
Ganzjährig 6 fl. = 12 Kr.

Für das Ausland:
Halbjährig 4 fl. = 8 Kr.
Ganzjährig 8 fl. = 16 Kr.
Einzeln Nummern 15 fr.

Programm.

Unsere Wochenschrift ist ein „Judenblatt“.

Wir nehmen dieses Wort, das ein Schimpf sein soll, und wollen daraus ein Wort der Ehre machen.

„Die Welt“ ist ein Blatt der Juden. Welcher Juden? Etwas der Starken, denen man ohnehin hilft? Nein, nein, die brauchen keine Unterhülfe.

„Die Welt“ ist das Blatt der Armen, der Schwachen, der Jungen, aber auch aller derjenigen, die sich, ohne selbst in bedrängter Lage zu sein, zu ihrem Stamme heimgefunden haben. Sage es Niemand, zu legen, daß wir den Klagenhuf in das Judenthum hineintragen, wenn wir uns der Schwachen unter unseren Weibern annehmen. Zu unseren Weibern stehen Männer genug, die weder „Professanten“, noch Unfrüher, noch Tollkose sind. Die Sache, der wir dienen, ist groß und schön, ein Werk des Friedens, die verhängnisvolle Lösung der Judenfrage. Ein Gedanke, wohl geeignet, edlere Menschen — sie seien Christen, Mohammedaner oder Israeliten — zu begeistern.

Wir möchten, um es mit den unseren Freunden schon vertrauten Worten zu sagen:

Eine widerrechtlich gefischerte Heimstätte schaffen für diejenigen Juden, die sich an ihren jetzigen Wohnorten nicht assimilieren können oder wollen.

Unter der Hionsfahne finden wir uns zusammen. Wäiden wir aber auch nach einem fernen Ziele, so dürfen und werden wir doch den heutigen Zuständen der Juden unsere Aufmerksamkeit nicht entziehen. „Die Welt“ soll dem jüdischen Volk eine Wehr und Waffe sein, und zwar eine reine Waffe. Gegen wen? Gegen seine Feinde — ohne Unterfchied der Confession.

Man erwarte dabei nicht, daß wir zur Sprache des Pöbels hinabsteigen oder daß wir Alles verherflichen werden, was Juden thun und lassen. Eine redliche, ernste Selbstkritik muß dem Judenthum ersprechlich sein, und die wollen wir üben, mögen auch Mängel darüber wechlagen, daß es „in dieser Zeit“ geschieht.

Eine der schwersten Folgen des Antisemitismus war es, daß „in dieser Zeit“ gewisse Leute eine Art von Straflosigkeit genossen. Was die Judenfeinde von ihnen sagten, galt natürlich als wüste Uebertreibung, und die anfänglichen Juden glaubten zu Allem schweigen zu müssen. Daraus konnte eine Soldbörstung Aller für die Niederträchtigkeiten Einzelner durch unsere Wegner resultirt werden. Und gerade die Minderwertigen unter den Juden hatten eine Dedung an unseren Feinden, indeß unsere Besten in ihrem Ehrgefühl tief beleidigt wurden.

Die neue nationaljüdische Bewegung will auch darin Wandel schaffen. Von unseren Unveritäten ist diese Bewegung vor fünfzehn Jahren ausgegangen, und es ist ihr ein Glanz von Idealen geblieben, selbst wenn sie nur seit Jahr und Tag in das praktische Leben hinausgetreten ist und mit dessen Bedingungen rechnet.

Wie viele thörichte Vorstellungen sind über unser wiedergeborenes Nationaljudenthum verbreitet! „Die Welt“ wird sie zerstreuen.

Man schieft uns durcheinander Reactionäre und Revolutionäre, wo wir doch nur einen maßvollen gesunden Fortschritt wünschen.

Wir hängen mit unserem Gemüth am Alten, das ist wahr, wir lieben die schöne kamp- und leidensvolle Vergangenheit unseres Volkes; aber wir wollen doch nicht in irgenbeine Enge des Geistes zurück. Es ist nur die Aufgabe der Dichtung und Geschichtschreibung, die wir nach Maßgabe des Raumes in der Zeitung pflegen werden, uns von den einstigen Zuständen zu berichten.

Solche Erinnerungen gehören uns allein, die Schönheit der Hoffnungen oder theilen wir mit allen Menschen. „In dieser Zeit“ des erneuten Judenammers gehen auch gar herrliche Dinge in der Welt vor. Die Naturkräfte werden bewältigt, die Kultur erobert sich rußlos neue Gebiete, aus dem Verleth der Völker entwickeln sich mildere Sitten, und eine tiefe Sehnsucht nach sozialen Reformen bewegt neben den Verrufen auch die Besten. Die junge Männlichkeit des Nationaljudenthums nimmt Theil an allen diesen Arbeiten und Bestrebungen — nicht etwa zum egoistischen Vortheil unseres Volkes allein, sondern auch zum Wohle anderer Menschen. Das wird sich in unserer Zeitung ebenfalls erkennen lassen.

Und zwischen Erinnerung und Hoffnung steht unsere That. Auf Erforschung der Zustände, Erkenntniß der politischen Weltlage, und Vereinigung aller Kräfte gründet sich unser Werk.

„Die Welt“ wird das Organ der Männer sein, die das Judenthum aus dieser Zeit hinauf in bessere Zeiten führen wollen.

Wien, den 3. Juni 1897.

Die Redaction der „Welt“.

FIGURE I.5. Inaugural issue of the Zionist organ, *Die Welt*. Digitale Sammlungen/ Compact Memory, Goethe University, Frankfurt.

Herzl himself remained committed to the priority of gaining international legitimacy for the cause. Hence his quixotic journeys in search of a “charter,” a definitive concession to open Ottoman Palestine to Jewish settlement and guarantee the security of Jewish property holdings there.

Therefore, in evaluating Herzl’s place in history, his intellectual contributions are of secondary importance. Rather, it was his charisma, ardor, and determination that set him apart from Pinsker, Birnbaum, and all other fore-runners. He assumed a gigantic role within Zionism, acquiring within a short time the aura of a messiah.⁴⁸ Chaim Weizmann, looking back on the history of Zionism in 1949, contrasted Herzl’s ideas, on the one hand, with his deeds and character, on the other:

We were right in our instinctive appreciation that what had emerged from the *Judenstaat* was less a concept than a historic personality. The *Judenstaat* by itself would have been nothing more than a nine days’ wonder. If Herzl had contented himself with the mere publication of the booklet—as he originally intended to do, before it became clear to him that he was no longer his own master, but the servant of the idea—his name would be remembered today as one of the oddities of Jewish history. What has given greatness to his name is Herzl’s role as a man of action, as the founder of the Zionist Congress, and as an example of daring and devotion.⁴⁹

Weizmann was absent from the First Congress, but his reflections are vividly confirmed by the experiences of those present. Joseph Klausner, a twenty-three-year-old student at the University of Heidelberg when he attended the First Congress, and later a distinguished scholar of Jewish history and literature, recalled:

It is not that Herzl came along and turned us into a nation. For Smolenskin had come before him and stated that we were not a religious grouping but a people. It is not that Herzl gave us a brand-new idea of a Jewish State. Pinsker’s “Auto-Emancipation,” which had appeared before he came on the scene, stated the idea in a most emphatic manner. But Herzl created something that can be hardly expressed in words. A different atmosphere prevailed, something totally new had come into being. The very same words that had been uttered by Smolenskin and Pinsker acquired a new quality, a new meaning, at the first Zionist Congress. I do not know how to put it. One Hebrew writer was so bold as to apply to Herzl the Biblical verse, “And he was king in Jeshurun.”

Dr. Ehrenpreis, in an appreciation of Herzl in the Hebrew journal, "Hashiloach," called him "an uncrowned king." It can be said that the whole of Zionism acquired something regal, a new quality became apparent in it. . . . It is not that the ideas were any greater, but that they were charged with a new spirit. . . . We had youth in those days—the Biluites and students. Some of them will occupy places in the forefront of Zionist history. But can the spirit that prevailed among them be compared to what happened after the first Zionist Congress? Hundreds of thousands of young people who would otherwise have been lost to Jewry, who would have joined other parties and worked for other nations, returned to Judaism, to Zion and to Palestine. What was the reason? It was the great watchword, the great spirit, and also the little things, the imponderabilia, that Herzl understood so well: our flag, the *shekel*, the Actions Committee, the Zionist Organization. All these things effected a radical transformation. I recall the discussions that took place before and after the first Congress. The whole of Jewry had altered, and was no longer recognisable. . . . Because of the great spirit that had been breathed everything soared to a new plane.⁵⁰

While Klausner's remarks, made for the Congress's jubilee, might be impugned as the gilding of youthful memories, he mentions some of the tangible expressions of the new and "great spirit" that came to pervade the Zionist movement under Herzl; and there is other, corroborating data. Thus, in Russia in 1896, after more than a decade of organized existence, Hovevei Zion had just twenty-three branches; the newly founded Russian Zionist organization had 356 by the end of 1897.⁵¹ Moreover, in contrast to the small, intermittent gatherings of Hovevei Zion, the almost annual Zionist Congresses attracted a large and growing numbers of delegates, from some two hundred in 1897 to 571 in 1903 (Herzl's last Congress).⁵² There was also a vast increase over time in "shekel-payers," who joined the Zionist Organization by means of a small financial contribution. This number grew from a little under one hundred thousand in 1900, to over two hundred thousand by 1913, and then to over eight hundred thousand in 1923.⁵³

So it was not unreasonable for Klausner, and myriad others, to feel that Herzl's decisive contribution was somehow his organizing of the 1897 Congress. He and many others were powerfully moved by the feeling that there in Basel a new era was beginning. So *Die Welt* was doing no more than giving expression to a widely held feeling when it titled its lead article about the Congress, "Ein geschichtlicher Augenblick" [An Historic Moment].⁵⁴



FIGURE I.6. Herzl on balcony at Hotel Drei Könige during the Zionist Congress. Wikimedia Commons/National Photo Collection of Israel.

WHY BASEL?—CONTEMPORARY JEWISH OBJECTIONS TO ZIONISM

The formal opening of that Congress took place in the concert hall of Basel's Stadtcasino, on Sunday morning, August 29, 1897. It is salient to note that no rabbi was asked to pray; rather, two Galician Jews with medical degrees conducted the ceremonial opening. At half past nine, Isidor Schalit, a dentist who had helped Herzl to organize the Congress, brought the gavel down thrice to call the meeting to order. Then the first speaker, Dr. Karpel Lippe, mounted the rostrum, covered his head, and recited a prayer before a hushed assembly: "Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has given us life, sustained us, and allowed us to reach this day."⁵⁵ Lippe held a medical degree from a German university but had been long resident in Romania. He had been chosen as the Congress's honorary president because he represented continuity

with the past: he had been at the Kattowitz Conference where Pinsker presided and was an outstanding figure among Romania's Hovevei Zion. In his speech to an excited crowd of delegates, he hailed the Congress as "a public assembly of the nation, to protest against 1800 years of persecution." But Lippe also declared that the purpose of the meeting was much greater than that of mere protest: "The object which is set before us for deliberation, is nothing less than the return of the Jews to the land of their fathers, the holy land, which our God, the one true God, promised our patriarch Abraham to be for us his descendants." His address was repeatedly interrupted by cheers; some delegates were moved to tears by the long-awaited realization of their hopes.⁵⁶

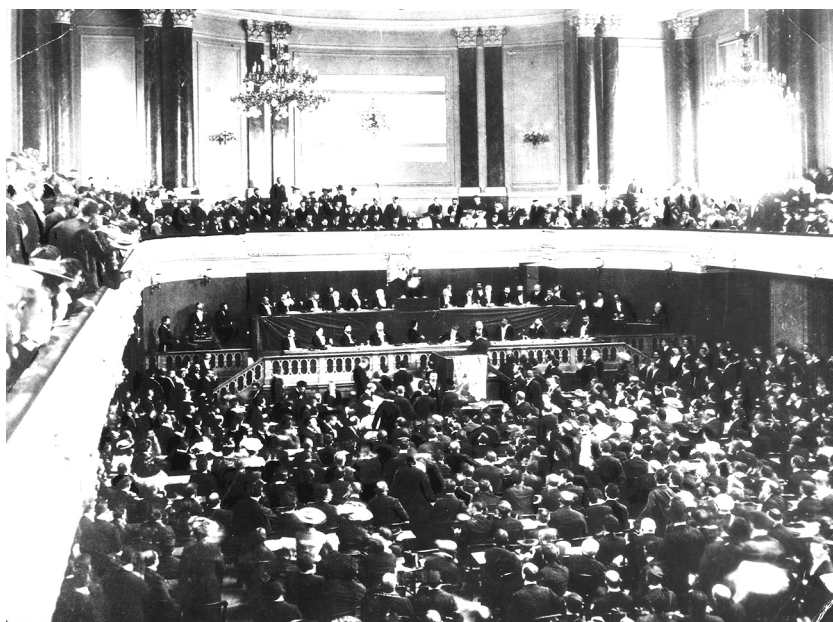


FIGURE I.7. The Zionist Congress in session, 1897 or 1898. Wikimedia Commons/National Photo Collection of Israel.

Lippe's assertion of the Congress's authority to represent world Jewry was given a measure of plausibility by the size and diversity of the gathering. The more than two hundred participants at the Congress came from twenty countries and/or distinct regions. Haiyam Orlan's study of the distribution of the participants by state and region yields the following data⁵⁷:

TABLE I.1. Provenance of participants at First Zionist Congress, Basel, 1897.

Algeria	1	Austria	27
Belgium	1	Bukovina (Romania)	3
Bulgaria	6	Bohemia & Slavonia (Austria)	5
England	11	France	12
Galicia (Austria)	19	Germany	42
Hungary	7	Italy	3
Netherlands	2	Palestine	4
Romania	8	Russia (with Poland, Lithuania, Latvia)	63
Serbia	2	Sweden	1
Switzerland	23	United States	5

An analysis of Orlan's list shows that about half of the participants (121 of 245 known participants) came from regions within the empires of Russia and Austria-Hungary. This is actually proportionately less than the total demographic weight of Jews living in these lands. It is estimated that around 1900 the population of European Jewry was approaching nine million (representing about 80 percent of Jews worldwide). At that time, there were more than five million Jews in the Russian Empire and more than two million in the Austro-Hungarian Empire; i.e., these two empires taken together accounted for more than 75 percent of all Jews in Europe and more than 60 percent worldwide.⁵⁸ But since a great many of the Jews ostensibly "representing" other regions had roots in the East, the percentage of *Ostjuden* at the Congress was perhaps not too different from their actual proportion in world Jewry.⁵⁹ (This would be even more the case if one excludes Swiss Jews, who were present in disproportionate numbers because of the conference's location. Many Swiss Jews were really observers rather than participants.)

But there were also major Jewish communities that were almost without representation in Basel. The most obvious were the Sephardim and Mizrachim from Morocco to Iran, including in particular the Jewish subjects of the Ottoman Empire. According to Ottoman census data, they numbered well over two hundred thousand at the time of the Congress.⁶⁰ It is also worth emphasizing that Orlan's statistics must not be interpreted to mean that delegations at Basel represented all or even most Jews of the lands from which they came. Vital suggests that about a third of the delegates were elected by a local