



Nahum Goldmann

Jewish and Zionist Statesman—An Overview

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Many of the chapters included in this volume share a propensity to comment on the diverse and frequently clashing characteristics of Nahum Goldmann: on the one hand, the charming diplomat and the bon vivant who enjoyed the pleasures of life; on the other, the political loner, acerbic, sharp, and unpredictable. Goldmann himself, in his various autobiographical writings¹ indulged in rosy descriptions about his life and light-hearted comments on his activities and style: the game of tennis he played on that night in August 1931, after he colluded to bring down Chaim Weizmann from the presidency of the World Zionist Organization (WZO); or his extensive vacations (“Every fourteen days Goldmann takes two weeks vacations”); his many citizenships; his readiness to jump from Europe to the United States (or the other way around) for a romantic tryst.² “*Es ging ihm immer gut*” (approximately, “he always had a good time”), so he described himself in his last memoir, by then well over eighty. “His life seems to have developed without too great commotions or difficulties.”³

Indeed? Or perhaps Goldmann was obfuscating and some scholars were taken in? If so, they are not alone: Goldmann’s contemporaries in the Zionist movement, and later in Israel, never really knew what to make of the man. They were in awe not only of his style but also, and very much so, of the substance: Goldmann’s uncanny ability to read a political reality still in flux and to recognize the necessary steps demanded (which were not always the conventional ones),

surprised and bewildered his colleagues. The more famous instances remained engraved in the collective memory of his peers, such as the partition proposal of Palestine of August 1946 or the negotiations with the Germans in 1950 through 1952. Or Goldmann's last, longest lasting, and ultimately unsuccessful crusade: his efforts to convince the Israeli government to adopt what he considered a more realistic attitude toward Israel's Arab neighbors.

Goldmann impressed his interlocutors as too clever, apt to suggest one thing while keeping a second option (so they suspected) up his sleeve. He seemed logical to a fault on the one hand, impossible to track on the other. In the spring of 1970 he approached Prime Minister Golda Meir and proposed to meet Egypt's President Nasser, for, well, not exactly negotiations, but at least an exchange of views that might lead to a better understanding between the sides. ("Look, Golda, what is so wrong with having a candid conversation with Nasser?"—Goldmann must have said, exuding plain good sense.) Meir, who probably saw the whole idea as a hopeless and potentially harmful ego trip, found ways to thwart the initiative—now, could it be that this is what Goldmann had been counting on all along?

Goldmann was not considered entirely reliable. "I am somewhat worried about the negotiations which our friend Goldmann is carrying out in London," wrote Weizmann in 1948, even though he himself introduced Goldmann to the British.⁴ Goldmann tended to be exceedingly optimistic, thought Weizmann, and many shared that view. Goldmann, an optimist? Weizmann, apparently, no longer remembered Goldmann's words at the Biltmore Conference in May 1942. Speculating about the dimensions of the ongoing troubles Eastern European Jewry faced (at that point, nobody in the West knew about the exact dimensions of the cataclysm happening in the German-conquered countries), Goldmann stressed that the reality might be much worse than suspected, and that after the war the survivors would be unable to rebuild their lives and their communities. "We should not fool ourselves into escaping from the results of these facts," he warned. On that occasion, Weizmann had been the more optimistic one. Although he feared that up to 25 percent of all Jews might perish, he drew a parallel from the experiences of World War I and had expressed the hope that Eastern European Jewry would arise again after the war stronger than before.⁵ Or in the late 1960s, when Israel, after the astonishing victory in the Six-Day War stood tall and proud as the undisputed military power of the Middle East, there was Goldmann fretting like a disturbing Cassandra amidst the general feeling of strength.⁶

And then again we see the other Goldmann, humane, tolerant, generous. His humor was famous, and some of his witticisms are still current in Israel, such as "a specialist is a person who knows everything, but nothing beyond." He radiated an immense charm, and few of his interlocutors (especially gentiles, apparently also many women) were able to resist him. Goldmann had a knack in finding the right approach to each interlocutor, perhaps because he was always able to see the point of view of the other side. Last but not least, he abhorred

extremisms, especially political ones. Writing about himself (an occupation he enjoyed very much, especially in his later years), he stated: “In the political life of the Jewish people, a people of dogmas and absolute truths, of passions and fanaticism, he [Goldmann] is an odd, almost un-Jewish phenomenon.”⁷ Unable to maintain a grudge, this was the closest he ever came to reproaching his opponents and tormentors, and during his Israeli years they were legion.

Which Goldmann, then? Behind the surrealistic image that has become fixed in contemporary Jewish and Israeli consciousness (resolutely fostered by Goldmann himself) there was, apparently, another Goldmann, of more plausible dimensions and understandable limits, but still a remarkable phenomenon both as a public figure and a private individual. This book explores the life and times of that more human Goldmann.

I. The Younger Years: Ideological Development

Nahum Goldmann was born on July 10, 1895, in Visznewo, a townlet in Lithuania, then part of the Russian Empire. Looking back in his old age, he described his first years in the *shtetl* as “unclouded by a single unhappy incident, and I attribute much of my self-confidence as an adult . . . to the harmony and serenity of early childhood.”⁸ Shortly after his birth his parents moved to Germany and he, a precocious but sickly child, was left with his grandparents, and his aunts and elders apparently pampered him. It was not until he was six years old that he was reunited with his parents, then living in Germany. For the child it meant adjusting to a new cultural environment, and parents—a father (a gentle man) and a mother (a strong-willed woman)—who he was, in fact, meeting for the first time.⁹ He never again saw his family in Visznewo.

His father, Solomon Goldmann, was a Hebrew educator. He had come to Germany to study at a university but it did not work out and after some tribulations he settled in Frankfurt, where he ran a boarding house for Eastern European Jewish university students, taught Hebrew, and edited a Hebrew weekly. In Frankfurt the family lived among Jewish immigrants, mostly *maskilim* from Eastern Europe. Typically, the home was religious and Zionist. Solomon Goldmann was active in the Mizrahi party and a disciple of the cultural Zionism of Ahad Haam. Young Nahum, the Goldmann’s only child, first went to a Jewish religious school but at age nine was enrolled in a German school and acquired a regular German education. While a teenager, Nahum turned from religious to secular Jewishness. After high school he went to the University of Heidelberg, where he studied law and philosophy. German culture became an integral part of his intellectual makeup. Like his home and milieu, Nahum was a Zionist—in his words, a “natural” Zionist, meaning a Jew of Eastern European origin whose attachment to Zionism was not the result of this or that turn or crisis in the modern Jewish condition, but an integral part of his Jewish identity.¹⁰

Nahum Goldmann is not considered, first and foremost, a Zionist thinker.¹¹ Nevertheless, he had well-articulated ideological views, which clearly molded his political positions and actions. In his youth he too adopted the Zionist cultural position of Ahad Haam. In an article published in 1923, in the wake of the Thirteenth Zionist Congress, Goldmann criticized the political-oriented tendency that had come to dominate the Zionist movement after the Balfour Declaration: he thought the Zionist movement had strayed from the spiritual goal of the national renaissance of the Jewish people.¹² During the 1920s he opposed the formation of the enlarged Jewish Agency that would include also non-Zionists. In his opinion, the price for the collaboration with the non-Zionists would be the dilution of the Jewish renewal that was so central to his Zionist ideology. Throughout his life Goldmann remained convinced that the inner condition of the Jewish people, “the problem of Judaism” in Ahad Haam’s formulation, was more relevant for Jewish existence than “the problem of the Jews.” That position was bound up with his views about the historical character of the Jewish people: “not better than others, or worse, but unique and different—by virtue of its structure, history, destiny, and character—from all other peoples, and paradoxical in its contradictions.”¹³ These specific traits of the Jews explained not only their history but also their present demands. In 1970 he declared, “Only if one understands the singularity of the Jewish people (which has nothing to do with any notion of superiority) and its tragic history can one suppose that the Jewish claim [to Palestine] is morally and historically superior.”¹⁴

A central pillar in Goldmann’s ideological position concerned the relationship between the Jewish diaspora and the independent Jewish entity the Zionist movement strove to establish in *Erez Israel*. Both should not be mutually exclusive but interdependent and support each other. Although his ideas about the diaspora–*Erez Israel* relationship were fully formulated only in later years, already in an essay published in 1919 Goldmann stressed that the reconstituted Jewish community in Palestine should be the center of Jewish life but would not lead to the disappearance of the diaspora. Therefore, one of the demands of the Jewish people was that Jews should get full national autonomy everywhere they requested such status.¹⁵ In later years Goldmann continued to hold quite similar views. “The situation of the Jews will never be normalized through a state alone, but only by creating a center in Palestine while at the same time retaining the great diaspora linked with the State in an enduring and mutually enriching relationship.”¹⁶ In his emphasis on Jewish life in the diaspora Goldmann came to differ also from Ahad Haam, who distinguished between the objective and the subjective realities of diaspora life, and was resigned regarding the first but critical of the second.¹⁷ Goldmann would explore his approach in full after the establishment of the Jewish state, when the Israel-diaspora equation became a major topic of public debate. This was to be the theme of a fierce confrontation with Ben-Gurion in 1957.

Goldmann’s ideological views were related to two additional issues, both in the realm of political behavior. One had to do with the idea of the

modern state; the other with considerations about the democratic process and, consequently, action in the framework of political parties.

In his younger years, during World War I, Goldmann had supported Germany and the German state.¹⁸ In later years he developed a critical position regarding the state as an institution, describing it as a dangerous idea rooted in German political philosophy and capable of huge destructive power. Goldmann stressed now that there was nothing permanent in the present organization of human society along the system of states.¹⁹ In any case, the state should never become an end but always remain only a tool; the real collective frame was the nation. Such a view squared well with his Zionist cultural approach.

Another theme Goldmann was critical of was the democratic process. He had a poor opinion not so much of the idea of democracy but of the actual workings of the parliamentary system.²⁰ "By nature, I am not a democrat. . . . I do not believe that parliamentary democracy as it exists today will last very much longer. The world has become too complex for its problems to be soluble by our good old democratic methods. . . ."²¹ In later years he remarked that his two major political achievements, the partition mission of 1946 and the reparations agreement with Germany from 1951 to 1952, would never have materialized by normal democratic means.²²

Nevertheless, Goldmann was an avowed liberal, and his self-description as a person of progressive, center-leftist leanings and a supporter of the pioneer movement in Palestine is convincing. In the early 1920s he participated in the socialist Zionist Hapoel Hazair delegation to one of the Zionist Congresses, "but I resigned a couple of days later when it was explained to me that I should be subject to party discipline."²³ Later he became a member of the small Zionist Radical Party led by Yitzhak Gruenbaum, where apparently each member was entitled to follow his own ideological inclinations. Because delegates to the Zionist Congress were elected according to established party keys, when after 1933 the Radical Party was dissolved, ways had to be found to enable Goldmann to participate as a rightful representative at the Zionist Congress.²⁴ In 1935 Goldmann became the representative of the Jewish Agency at the League of Nations, and as such also a member of the Executive of the Jewish Agency. In fact he was the only person with a formal standing in the Zionist leadership who was not affiliated with any party, a situation that continued in later years. This fact would become a major problem after the establishment of Israel, when Goldmann had to decide about his political participation in the young state.

II. The 1930s: The Geneva Period

In the 1920s Goldmann became involved in several Jewish and Zionist cultural enterprises in association with Jacob Klatzkin, a well-known Jewish intellectual and an important Zionist thinker, whom Goldmann had known

since his youth.²⁵ The most important of their initiatives was the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, which began to appear in the late 1920s. Ten volumes in German and two in Hebrew were published before the project collapsed in 1933, when the Nazis assumed power. An English edition had also been planned and would appear forty years later under new auspices in Israel.²⁶

The Nazi ascendance to power brought the German period in Goldmann's life to an end. In the spring of 1933 he left Berlin and settled in Geneva.²⁷ Although it was neither his first nor his last migration, this one had a distinctive poignancy. Goldmann had considered himself as a Jew well established in Germany, well integrated into German culture, the possessor of a German law degree.²⁸ He had planned to dedicate several more years to the publication of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, and later on probably to continue with additional works of a cultural nature. All this now came to an end. Goldmann was forced to leave, and in fact he never again struck roots anywhere. His public career now started in earnest.

Goldmann's seven years in Geneva were divided between Jewish and Zionist tasks with Jewish matters having actually a certain predominance. Toward the end of 1933 he became the head of the Comité des Delegation Juives, replacing Leo Motzkin, who had passed away. The Comité had been established in 1919 at the Peace Conference in Paris, to act for the minority rights that the Jews had attained in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.²⁹ At the Nineteenth Zionist Congress (1935), Goldmann was chosen as representative of the Jewish Agency at the League of Nations. According to the terms of the mandate for Palestine approved by the League of Nations in 1922, the Jewish Agency was a recognized body that in collaboration with and under the supervision of the mandatory power, Great Britain, was entitled to participate in the development of a Jewish national home in Palestine. The main work of the Jewish Agency was, obviously, in London and in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, the presence of a Zionist representative at the headquarters of the League of Nations in Geneva had a certain political significance, the more so due to his semi-official standing, which enabled Goldmann to intervene also in matters related to Jewish rights. Last, in August 1936 Goldmann participated in the foundation of a new Jewish organization, the World Jewish Congress (WJC).

The WJC was very much the initiative of Stephen S. Wise, a founding father of the American Zionist movement, a prestigious liberal rabbi, and a figure well connected to the U.S. administration. The idea came from a success story, albeit a short-lived one, from the days of World War I: the first American Jewish Congress (AJC). Established in 1916, the AJC brought together under a carefully balanced platform most of the major organizations of American Jewry: Zionists, anti-Zionists, the diverse religious organizations, the large *landsmanshaftn*, the fraternal orders, and the Jewish labor organizations. Under the masterful leadership of one of the great figures in American Jewry, Louis Marshall, a delegation of the AJC acted successfully at the Peace

Conference in Paris, assuring civil and political rights for the Jews in the new countries created after World War I in Central and Eastern Europe.³⁰

According to the terms of its charter, the first American Jewish Congress declared itself dissolved in 1920.³¹ The memory of the first Congress lingered on and brought about the creation of another, even broader framework, the WJC, in 1936.³²

According to its statutes, the WJC acted for “representative Jewish bodies, communities and organizations” throughout the world. In other words, it was neither a democratically elected body, nor an agreed-upon umbrella organization, but a new entity aiming to express the supposedly common will of a wide range of Jewish associations of very varied scope and character. Like the AJC, the WJC was heavily influenced by Zionists, and its scope of action was Jewish-general. At the beginning Goldmann may have wondered if the WJC was really necessary. It may have appeared to him that the Jewish Agency and the Comité des Delegations Juives adequately represented Jewish needs. Soon, however, he undoubtedly discovered that the WJC represented a very useful Jewish platform, one that seemed to impress his non-Jewish interlocutors, not the least due to its American Jewish connections.

The gradual erosion of Jewish political rights in the Central and Eastern European states and the worsening problem of Jewish refugees, especially those being forced out of Nazi Germany, were questions that occupied Goldmann very much in those years. A sobering demonstration of the helplessness of the Jewish situation, as well as an ominous sign of things to come, was the Intergovernmental Conference on Refugees that met in Evian, France, in July 1938 with the participation of representatives of twenty-one countries. Goldmann watched helplessly as almost none of the countries present indicated any inclination to accept refugees, a sizable number of whom were Jews. Worse, observers sent to the conference by numerous Jewish organizations were unable to agree on a common agenda.³³

From the perspective of later years, Goldmann saw himself in Geneva, “in a sense, the official Jewish representative on all diaspora questions.”³⁴ In fact, it did not amount to much, even if the combination of the functions in one person added a certain visibility to the Jewish presence. By 1938, none of the positions Goldmann filled in Geneva had any real importance. The League of Nations had lost most of its prestige and influence and the intervention through the League by Jewish representatives for matters relating to Jews in the European countries was by then of very limited effectiveness.

With the start of World War II in September 1939, Goldmann and his colleagues of the Jewish Agency and of the WJC understood that his usefulness in Geneva had reached an end. Goldmann, now with a young family, emigrated again, this time to the United States. They arrived in New York in June 1940. New York would remain what Goldmann called, not his home, but his “home base,” until 1964 when he emigrated once again.

III. The 1940s: The American Period

Life in the United States and the American scene, both Jewish and general, were for Goldmann a new experience that, in the conditions of the war, had to be absorbed as quickly as possible.³⁵ Goldmann knew that in the conditions of war the United States represented the last option to aid the beleaguered Jews of Europe. Appearing in the name of the WJC, Goldmann and Stephen S. Wise—the relations between both became very close in those years—sought contacts with different figures in the American administration in order to help Jewish refugees or Jews trapped in Europe. The results, Goldmann later sadly admitted, were mostly disappointing. It was the experience of Evian repeating itself, this time in the United States. Neither the Jews nor the gentiles in the United States were able to cope with the dimensions of the tragedy that befell European Jewry.³⁶

As was later the case in Israel, Goldmann never became fully acclimated in the United States. Although he soon acquired U.S. citizenship, he remained the essential European.³⁷ Nevertheless, Goldmann became increasingly involved in Zionist work in the United States, always in coordination with Wise. The broadening of Zionist activity in the United States in the 1940s was rooted in a strategy of Zionist foreign policy: political connection to a great power.³⁸ Considering the international scene, the turn to the United States was almost natural, although the efforts to reach an understanding with the different American administrations would prove a difficult and torturous enterprise. In the 1940s, the bearers of that political work were the American Zionist movement and to a lesser degree, members of the Executive of the Jewish Agency that came to the United States. Goldmann was living now in the United States, and David Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann were, since 1940, frequent visitors.

Guided by Wise, Goldmann soon found his way in the American political establishment, as well as among the leading Zionist figures and in the Jewish community. He took part in the organization of the Extraordinary Zionist Conference in New York City in May 1942, in which Weizmann and Ben-Gurion also participated. The Biltmore Conference (so called after the hotel where the meetings took place) approved a resolution calling for the establishment of a “Jewish Commonwealth” in Palestine after the war—the first authoritative Zionist demand for Jewish statehood. Soon Goldmann became involved in the organization of the American Jewish Conference, which met in New York in August 1943. Its central aim was to unite American Jewry around an agreed policy for European Jewry and for the Jewish state platform approved a year earlier.³⁹

In the 1940s, a new body emerged, the American Zionist Emergency Council (AZEC), representing the main American Zionist organizations.⁴⁰ Its goal was to centralize Zionist political activity during and after the war. Wise and Abba Hillel Silver jointly chaired the AZEC.⁴¹ Silver was a forceful personality, a spellbinding orator, proud, independent, and difficult to work with. He soon pushed Wise aside. Goldmann proved harder for Silver to marginalize.

Weizmann, the WZO president, who considered the American movement hopelessly disorganized (an assumption Silver would soon prove wrong), decided in June 1943 to establish a political bureau of the Jewish Agency in Washington, under the joint direction of Goldmann and Louis Lipsky, a veteran American Zionist leader.⁴² Since the Jewish Agency representatives and the AZEC concentrated on the same issues, clashes soon erupted between Goldmann and Silver, who considered the political activity in Washington as the prerogative of the AZEC.⁴³ In fact, the influence and importance of the AZEC, which counted on the support of a large and engaged nationwide network of Zionist branches, was undoubtedly greater, especially after 1944, when Silver became the dominant AZEC figure.

Goldmann's name was known in the Zionist establishment, but he could hardly be considered a leading figure in the movement. He did not represent a well-defined ideological position nor did he belong to one of the large political groupings of the Zionist movement. A member of the Executive of the Jewish Agency, he was not linked to the London group close to Weizmann (whose power, in any case, was waning) nor to the *Erez Israeli* faction led by Ben-Gurion. Although the virtual head of the American bureau of the Jewish Agency, Goldmann had practically no influence on the Silver-dominated AZEC. He had established contacts in the United States, but control over the swelling Jewish and Zionist rank and file, with the corresponding capability to influence broader American political circles, remained firmly in the hands of the AZEC.⁴⁴ Thus far, Goldmann had not been associated with any major political initiative in Zionist life. All this changed in August 1946, when Goldmann scored the first great political and diplomatic breakthrough of his career.

IV. The Partition Proposal of 1946

For the present-day student of Zionist history familiar with the achievements of Zionist policy in 1947 and 1948, it is difficult to imagine that only a year before, in the summer of 1946, the Zionist enterprise was faced with one of the most serious crises in its history. Toward the end of World War II it became clear that most of European Jewry, the human reservoir of the Zionist enterprise, had perished. In Palestine, relations with the British were at a breaking point. The British elections in mid-1945 propelled the Labor Party into power. Notwithstanding repeated past declarations of support for Zionist aspirations in Palestine, the new British government decided to uphold the 1939 White Paper. Such a policy was totally opposed by the Zionists because it relegated the Jews to minority status in a future Arab-dominated Palestinian state. The British were moved by unabashed Realpolitik logic: the future of the Middle East rested, in their view, with the emerging and increasingly assertive Arab countries. The Arabs, since 1945 represented by the Arab League, rejected any political concessions to the Zionists and demanded

independence in Palestine. Faced with an uncompromising confrontation between Jews and Arabs, the British had decided to side with the Arabs, calculating that it would better serve the interests of Great Britain in the Middle East, although it meant sacrificing Jewish aspirations in Palestine.⁴⁵

In the fall of 1945 the Executive of the Jewish Agency decided to turn against the White Paper policy through so-called "activist" means.⁴⁶ In practice it meant, at that point, forcing the entry of Jewish immigrants into the country by violent means if necessary. The Zionists intended, in the long run, to compel the British government to reconsider its Palestinian policy. However, the actual results were quite different from what the Zionists hoped for. Jewish violence led to British counterviolence, and by the summer of 1946 the Jewish community in Palestine and the British authorities were set on a course of confrontation that did not bode well for the Zionists. On Black Sabbath (June 29, 1946) destructive searches were conducted in dozens of cities and settlements and hundreds of Jews were imprisoned, including Zionist leaders. A month later the Jewish underground organization Ezel planted a bomb in a section of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, which housed offices of the British administration. Close to 100 people were killed or wounded in the explosion. A harsh British reaction appeared imminent.

In hindsight, the factor that may have prevented a strong British reaction was concern over possible U.S. reaction. With the end of World War II, the United States had become a central, albeit reluctant, participant in the international policy regarding the Middle East. The realities of the postwar situation, such as the growing importance of the oil resources of the region and the ambitious expansion plans of the Soviet Union forced the Americans toward an increased concern over the Middle East. Zionist agitation in the United States played a certain role in that process.

In response to demands of American Jewish organizations, President Harry Truman took an interest in the future of the Jewish refugees in Europe. In August 1945 the White House approached the British with the suggestion that 100,000 European Jewish refugees be allowed to enter Palestine. Toward the end of 1945, the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry was created to study the problem of the Jewish refugees in Europe and its relationship to Palestine. The recommendations of the commission, published in April 1946, endorsed again the absorption of 100,000 Jewish refugees in Palestine, but the British once more rejected such a solution.⁴⁷ Instead, yet another British-American commission, the Morrison-Grady Commission, presented in June 1946 a plan for the division of Palestine into semiautonomous Jewish and Arab cantons. The Jews would have some say in their sectors, but British dominance in the country would continue. The Zionists vehemently rejected the plan. They saw it as a continuation of the White Paper regime under a different name: no transfer of European Jewish refugees to Palestine and essential matters such as immigration and land transfers remaining beyond Jewish control.⁴⁸ It appeared, however, that the U.S. government might endorse the plan.

Against the background of such a bleak political situation, the Executive of the Jewish Agency met in Paris to consider its options. Goldmann traveled from New York to participate in the meeting.⁴⁹ A general tenor of disorientation hung over the deliberations. The main figures in the Zionist leadership—Weizmann in London, Silver in New York, and Ben-Gurion (who had escaped imprisonment by the British because he was not in Palestine during Black Sabbath) in Paris—were of one mind about the major goals of the Zionist movement: termination of the British mandate, establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Beyond that, little agreement was found between them on how to achieve those goals, and the obstacles seemed insurmountable. The British had not budged politically and the “activist” line in Palestine had brought trouble and sorrow to the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine. The Zionists seemed unable to thwart the very objectionable Morrison-Grady Plan, and in general, their influence in London and in Washington appeared negligible. All together, the Zionists were caught in political disarray, faced with vital problems, insufficient understanding among the diverse sectors of the movement, and few realistic options pointing a way out of their predicament.

That was Goldmann’s cue. Grasping more accurately than his associates in the Zionist leadership the broader contours of the political situation of the movement, he proposed now to the Executive of the Jewish Agency a new course of action. Information had reached him from Washington, Goldmann told the meeting, that the Americans would decide in the next days regarding the Morrison-Grady Plan. “Friends of ours, close to the administration,” he said, “have indicated that it would be very advisable for a member of the Executive to go to Washington for a few days, that is, a member who would have the authority to speak on behalf of the Executive [Goldmann had himself in mind] and bring to the Government the minimum demands of the Agency with regard to the new British proposals.”⁵⁰ What demands? Goldmann stressed that the current Zionist strategy in Palestine had not only been without positive results, but was outright dangerous for the future of the Jewish national home. A chance had now arisen for an alternative course, due to the political circumstances in Washington, and the fact that the British were interested in good relations with the Americans. Through the good offices of the U.S. government, Goldmann said, changes might be introduced into the Morrison-Grady Plan that would refocus the plan toward the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine.

“All this presupposes one decision,” Goldmann emphasized, getting to the main point of his proposal:

that we are ready to accept partition. For years we have postponed discussion of this issue. We were afraid of internal differences of opinion. We are afraid to play out the cards and to take positions. I have always warned that the time will come when we shall have to decide without notice, and this is the moment. Unless we are ready to

tell the President that we are ready to accept the Jewish State in an adequate part of Palestine, it is no use going to Washington and trying to obtain these improvements. I felt for years that partition of Palestine is the only way out. Biltmore [the Biltmore Program] is no realistic policy of the movement, because we have no Jewish majority, and we cannot wait until we have the majority to get the State.

I know it is a tragic decision, but we have only the choice between two things, British rule with the White Paper policy, or a Jewish State in part of Palestine. For the reasons I have given, I choose the Jewish State in a part of Palestine today. If the Executive agrees and assumes the responsibility, as we cannot wait for the [Zionist] Congress, we must send a representative to Washington to advise the President along these lines.⁵¹

Goldmann's was certainly one of the strongest pleas for a partition solution ever uttered in the Zionist leadership. He was treading on very sensitive ground, and we may well suppose that he, as well as the other members of the Executive present at the meeting, were aware of it. The idea that the Land of Israel might be partitioned between Jews and Arabs was (and has remained) one of the most divisive issues—indeed, one of the most explosive ones—in Zionist and later in Israeli history. Since 1937, when the British first put forth the proposal, then adopted ever so reluctantly by the Zionists, and finally rejected by all—British, Zionists, and Arabs, each for their own reasons—the idea of partition had not disappeared. The possibility was occasionally raised both in internal Zionist discussions as well as in conversations with British officials and others.

In the Zionist movement some rejected partition out of principle. Others adopted what they considered a tactically astute position: that the Zionists should never suggest partition of their own volition, but if the idea were to be brought up by an external party, such as the British or the Americans, it should be considered. Supposedly, this tactic had two advantages: it avoided, at least at the outset, a difficult internal debate in the movement and the Zionists, reacting to an outside proposal, were in a better position to negotiate.⁵² Abba Hillel Silver (who in any case disliked the idea of partition) and his AZEC associates favored such a tactical approach.⁵³

Goldmann was strongly opposed to the tactical option, which in his view did not lead anywhere. In 1945–1946 he spoke about and for partition openly and frequently.⁵⁴ In his memoirs he poured scorn on the Zionists who had opposed partition. It was a sign of political immaturity, of “inability to compromise . . . the obstinacy and fanaticism of a persecuted people that for two thousand years had set beliefs and ideals above reality and practical necessity. . . .”⁵⁵ Now, in mid-1946, his emphasis was on the necessity of Jewish statehood, and partition was for him a means to Jewish statehood. Goldmann's position was bolstered by his understanding of the new international reality that resulted from the establishment

in 1945 of the Organization of the United Nations. The growing influence of the Arab states and their allies at the U.N. made the Zionist efforts for Jewish statehood all the more urgent.⁵⁶ Last, and diverging from many opponents of partition, Goldmann stressed the tactical advantages of his proposal, considering the political realities the Zionists faced at that moment: instead of concentrating on negative solutions—against the 1939 White Paper, against the British mandate, against the Morrison-Grady Plan—the Zionists would come up with a positive proposal, one that pointed toward new solutions and new hopes for the Palestinian problem.

The Executive of the Jewish Agency debated Goldmann's proposal for two days—in fact, almost up to the moment he had to board the airplane to New York. Although the mission was endorsed and a set of resolutions was approved, the preceding discussions had a strange character: they were unfocused, repetitive, small matters mixing with big questions, and above all, the sessions were poorly managed by the chairman, David Ben-Gurion. What exactly Ben-Gurion's position was is difficult to understand from the minutes. About two weeks earlier, he had himself written to diverse people supporting partition.⁵⁷ Now, at the meeting, he did not speak clearly in favor of Goldmann's suggested mission, but neither did he oppose it, which would have aborted the initiative. Ben-Gurion may well have abstained when the final vote was taken.

Goldmann himself proposed the resolutions approved at the meeting. The first stated that the Morrison-Grady Plan was regarded "as unacceptable as a basis of discussion." The second resolution, which was the main one, declared, "The Executive [of the Jewish Agency] is prepared to discuss a proposal for the establishment of a viable Jewish state in an adequate area of Palestine."⁵⁸

Goldmann arrived in New York on August 6, 1946. He spent four and a half very busy days in New York and in Washington. He conferred with Silver and the AZEC activists, with members of the American cabinet and officials of the U.S. State Department, and with the British ambassador. His most consequential conversations were with Dean Acheson, the Acting Secretary of State, to whom he presented and justified the resolutions of the Executive of the Jewish Agency. The two men met twice and seem to have found a common language. Acheson, who considered the Middle East and Palestine exclusively from the angle of American interests, apparently saw in the partition proposal a way that would facilitate U.S.-British relations, alleviate the political pressure the AZEC exerted in Washington, and perhaps be accepted by the Arabs.⁵⁹ Goldmann would have liked to meet President Truman but this was not feasible. Nevertheless, the president was informed about the proposals and responded in a positive albeit general way, leaving the exact phrasing of the U.S. position to the State Department.

Goldmann returned to Paris on August 11, sure that the Americans had endorsed the partition plan.⁶⁰ It proved an overly optimistic evaluation. The State Department, in its formulation of the American position, did not endorse

the proposal but only transmitted the Zionist resolutions, albeit in a fairly positive tone, to the British.⁶¹ The message mentioned again the refutation of the Morrison-Grady Plan. This, however, was not Goldmann's doing, but Silver's, who had cleverly orchestrated the AZEC activities in Washington against the recommendations. In fact, the Morrison-Grady Plan was already dead before Goldmann arrived in the United States.⁶² Now a convenient opportunity had arisen to bury it once and for all.

Once again Goldmann ran into trouble with Silver and his associates. Goldmann had managed to meet Acheson without taking Silver with him. "I could not be sure that he [Silver] would sincerely uphold the partition plan he privately rejected," he explained later in his memoirs. "Besides, I knew that Acheson preferred to confer with me alone, having had an embarrassing clash with Dr. Silver a few months earlier."⁶³ When Silver learned about the exact results of Goldmann's negotiations in Washington, namely, that the American administration had not endorsed the partition plan of Palestine as its policy but only taken notice of it, the information seemed to confirm his worst scenario. On August 14 he announced to Ben-Gurion his resignation from the Executive of the Jewish Agency. In his view, Goldmann's mission had been a failure and caused great harm to the Zionist political work in the United States.⁶⁴ At the first opportunity—the Twenty-Second Zionist Congress in December 1946—Silver and his allies made Goldmann pay a heavy price for his American mission. Silver saw to it that Goldmann was severely restricted in his independent diplomatic action. Although elected as member of the Zionist Executive, he was relegated to act in London, where there was by then little to do. In 1947, during that fateful year in Zionist politics and diplomacy, Goldmann was brought back to New York as member of the Zionist delegation at the U.N., but kept under the strict control of Silver, virtually unable to act on his own.

Hindsight has recognized the direct and indirect impact of the Goldmann mission. At the time, however, the results of his demarches in Washington failed to impress his peers and were even rejected by many. This is hardly surprising considering how contentious the partition idea was for many Zionists.

In the personal sense, the Washington mission had all the characteristics of the "Goldmann style," the combination of cold calculation with daring that would become legendary in later years. He had elaborated a political proposal where the rejection of the Morrison-Grady Plan, the drive for Jewish statehood, and partition fitted harmoniously together. He recognized the opportunity that arose in the summer of 1946 to translate his views into a plan of action and seized his chance with both hands. In fact, Goldmann acted quite alone. Although he cajoled the Executive of the Jewish Agency to endorse partition and to agree to his journey to Washington, his colleagues were not fully convinced.

True, in the short term Goldmann's mission fell short of what he had hoped for. The British Foreign Ministry, on receiving the Zionist proposal

from the Americans, considered it as a possibility among others, but in fact rejected the plan and neither then nor in the coming months adopted it as a policy. And from a Zionist perspective, the Twenty-Second Zionist Congress in December 1946 actually rejected the partition of Palestine and reaffirmed the demand for Palestine as a Jewish commonwealth (and not a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine). Goldmann fought spiritedly at the Congress for his views, but he was powerless against the coalition of the Silver-dominated American delegates, allied with the Revisionists and other parties—and unsupported by Ben-Gurion, whose priorities at this juncture were different.

Nevertheless, the Zionist proposals, and the debate related to them, had an indirect result that was extremely important: it bought time for both the British and the Zionists. It allowed a slowing down in the spiral of growing confrontation between both sides. It made possible a return to negotiations, which even if proved futile, opened the way to the next political step in the Palestinian drama, when in the spring of 1947 the British presented the question of Palestine before the U.N. General Assembly. Suddenly the whole Zionist movement found itself energetically engaged in the political work for partition, the idea supported also by the deniers-in-principle, hand in hand with the tactical opponents, as if all of them had never dreamed about anything else than the partition of Palestine! A change in circumstances and a general sense that there were no better alternatives brought the Zionists around. Proving the ruthlessness of political life, at that very hour the initiator of the latest thrust toward partition, Nahum Goldmann, the man who had foreseen all this, was relegated by his associates in the Zionist leadership to a secondary position. During the next crucial months Goldmann's great diplomatic talents were hardly put to use.

Establishing Goldmann's undisputed place as a Jewish leader would take three more years and one more great political achievement.

V. The Founding of Israel

Inevitably, the creation of the Jewish state was for Goldmann, as for all other figures in the leadership of the Zionist movement, a time of personal realignment. The senior figures of the political parties, or of the executive organs of the Zionist movement and the Jewish Agency now became the natural candidates to head government offices, high administrative positions, or become members of the Israeli parliament, the Knesset. According to his memoirs, Goldmann was repeatedly asked to participate in the government and in the political life of the young state, and that after careful reflection he turned the offers down.⁶⁵ In fact, in 1948 Goldmann was certainly known in Israel, but he had yet to acquire the public stature he would several years later after the Reparations Agreement with Germany. The Israeli government was a coalition of parties, and in the first cabinets the center-left Mapai occupied the main ministries, the other partners usually

being the religious parties (Mizrahi and Agudat Israel), the center parties (General Zionists and Progressives), and occasionally also the left-wing Mapam. The control of ministries was hard fought and coalitions came about or fell apart depending on agreements or disagreements regarding which party got what offices. Goldmann had some connection to one of the General Zionist parties (the A group, of a moderate center-left orientation), which in 1948 joined with others to form the new (and small) Progressive Party. Goldmann was not an active or long-established member. In fact, almost all the ministers in the first Israeli governments had been living and were publicly active in the Yishuv for years. Goldmann was still living in the United States (he formally emigrated to Israel only in 1964) and had little chance to achieve ministerial status. Besides, the position that would have suited Goldmann best, the Foreign Ministry, was securely in the hands of the capable Moshe Sharett, a central figure in Mapai. In the end, Goldmann's decision not to integrate into the normal political life of Israel barred his way from attaining a role in the political leadership of the young state.

Most of Goldmann's subsequent attempts to explain why he did not participate in politics in Israel are unconvincing: to accept an official position in Israel, he would have had to resign from all his positions in the worldwide Jewish organizations; as a representative of a small party (such as the Progressives) he would have had only limited political influence; a half-hearted attempt in a 1961 campaign and an address to groups of citizens had shown him that he failed to impress his listeners; and so on.⁶⁶ In fact, from the mid-1950s to the 1970s, an open field in the center of the Israeli political scene, between the socialist left and the nationalist right, lacked what Goldmann might have provided: a recognized and savvy leader. Therefore, one is left with a feeling that some other personal motives steered his decisions in that matter. Of course, he had his doubts about the democratic system in general, which surfaced already in the 1920s. But could Goldmann, well attuned as he was to his peers, fail to observe how many authoritarian persons were in the higher echelons of Zionist politics, most of them well-known to him, who hardly could be considered as "natural" democrats? Not only David Ben-Gurion, but also men such as Vladimir Jabotinsky, Menahem Ussishkin, Louis D. Brandeis, Abba Hillel Silver, and many more. Goldmann must have understood that they, and many others, bowed to the demands of the democratic way not necessarily out of conviction of the supposed advantages of the parliamentary system. The contingencies of political life in the Zionist movement (and later in Israel) were certainly as important, and perhaps even more so: political power depended on the voluntary support of the Zionist membership (and later the Israeli citizenry); nobody could be coerced, and only the democratic system established a formal ground for concerted and accepted action. For reasons that remain difficult to explain, Goldmann refused to comply with these imperatives of Zionist and Israeli politics. He had a visceral lack of empathy, perhaps not with democracy in its ideal sense, but with its practical obligations. A shadow of doubt accompanied him in his later years, whether his decision had

been the right one.⁶⁷ But he had opted out, and his choice shaped his public way in his later years.

As important as the question of his political role and future in the new state must have been for Goldmann, in the first years after the establishment of Israel other matters in the Jewish and Zionist realm also occupied him very much, first in the United States, soon also in Europe. In 1949, with the death of Stephen S. Wise, Goldmann became the head of the WJC, a position of limited power and great public visibility.

Between 1948 and 1951, a confrontation developed between the leadership of the American Zionist movement and Israel—more exactly, between Silver and Ben-Gurion. Goldmann played an important tactical role behind the scenes and contributed to the fall of Silver.⁶⁸ Once Israel was established, the question of the relationship between the Jewish state and the WZO, stood high on the agenda of both bodies.⁶⁹ One major issue was the so-called *hafradah* [separation] between the two bodies. The matter was sharply formulated in 1948 by the president of the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA), Emanuel Neumann, the closest associate of Silver: “. . . the first principle which we must accept without reservation is that of a definitive political separation between the Jews of the world and the Republic of Israel. The separation must be clear-cut and unequivocal.”⁷⁰ As a principle, there was nothing in it that Ben-Gurion would not have accepted. In fact, at a meeting of the Zionist Executive in Jerusalem in August 1948, the first after the creation of the state, he let Silver and Neumann convince him that as prime minister of the state he could no longer serve as chairman of the Zionist Executive, a body of worldwide Jewish significance.⁷¹

The 1948 deliberations in Jerusalem strengthened significantly the American section of the Zionist Executive, which Silver dominated at this point. Because the American movement was by now the largest in the diaspora, and considering its significant contribution to the creation of the Jewish state, the question now was the level of involvement it might (or should) possess in Israel. Combining principle with practical matters, one obvious instrument of influence were the fund collections of American Jewry. When Silver, back in the United States, tried to oust the chairman of the United Jewish Appeal (UJA), Henry Morgenthau Jr., and be elected instead, warning bells rang. The UJA was the main Jewish funds gathering agency in the United States, and an agreed percentage of its collections were turned over to the United Palestine Appeal (UPA). Dominating the UJA would have given Silver large control over the financial means that American Jewry brought together for Israel. Such a move was opposed by a group in the American Zionist leadership who did not belong to Silver's camp, Goldmann included, and by the Israeli members of the Executive of the Jewish Agency.⁷²

Goldmann was apparently the mastermind behind a sequence of tactical steps aimed at bringing Silver down. In February 1949 a meeting of Executive

of the Jewish Agency took place in New York, the first time that the whole Executive met in the United States. Most of the participants expressed opposition to Silver's plans and against his leadership style in general. Chagrined by the intervention of the World Zionist leadership in what he considered an internal American Jewish issue, Silver resigned from the Executive of the Jewish Agency—which is what Goldmann had foreseen and hoped for.⁷³ Soon afterward Goldmann got himself elected instead of Silver as chairman of the American section of the Executive. Silver tried to organize his return to the Zionist leadership at the Twenty-Third Zionist Congress (Jerusalem, August 1951). Again, the general discussion was about the terms of collaboration between the Zionist movement and the Jewish state. Goldmann played a prominent role in the debate, but essentially it was a confrontation between Silver and Ben-Gurion. Silver was defeated and afterward refused to fill leading positions in the Zionist movement. Goldmann and Berl Locker were elected joint chairmen of the Executive of the Jewish Agency, Locker operating out of Jerusalem, Goldmann out of New York.⁷⁴

At that point, Goldmann was already deeply involved in what became a major undertaking of his public career: the German reparations.

VI. The Reparations Agreement with Germany, 1951–1952

Goldmann's role in the reparations agreement, signed in Luxembourg on September 10, 1952, between Germany and Israel, was one of the major accomplishments of his public life. From a Jewish point of view, the very question of relations with Germans and Germany, less than a decade after the Holocaust, was a minefield that few Jewish (and even less so, Israeli) public figures were ready to broach. Besides the emotional burden, baffling legal questions were involved. Such an accord would create new ground rules in international law and relations. "There hardly was a precedent for persuading a state to assume moral responsibility and make large-scale compensation for crimes committed against an unorganized ethnic group lacking any sovereign status," wrote Goldmann in his memoirs. "There was no basis in international law for the collective Jewish claims; neither Israel nor the Jewish people could use power politics to force Germany to recognize them."⁷⁵ The delicate and complex negotiations required thoughtful supervision. Ideas had to be generated, juridical and practical obstacles overcome, the doubtful convinced, moments of crisis defused, and all sides involved had to be ever so carefully prodded along toward the final agreement.⁷⁶ All in all a task uniquely suited to the talents of Nahum Goldmann, and the results bore many of the markings of his heterodox way of thinking and public demeanor. The treaty signed at the end of the sometimes-confounding negotiations was between two states, one of which had not been in existence when the crimes being recompensed for had been committed.

Germany recognized a double material obligation separately calculated, one toward the Jewish people, the other toward the Jewish state, the rationale in the second case being that Israel had rehabilitated hundreds of thousands of persecuted Jews and Holocaust survivors.

Demand for material restitution and compensation for the victims of Nazi persecution had been voiced already in the mid-1940s. At an international Jewish conference in Atlantic City in November 1944, organized by Goldmann's WJC, comprehensive resolutions were adopted regarding diverse aspects of the reparations issue.⁷⁷ The very concept of "reparations" was new. The idea was not his own, Goldmann recounts in his memoirs, but had been conceived by the Robinson brothers, Nehemiah and Jacob, two talented Jewish jurists who had emigrated from Lithuania to the United States in the early 1940s and worked for the WJC.⁷⁸ After the end of the war Chaim Weizmann, as head of the Jewish Agency, had addressed formally the Four Powers (United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union) with a demand for restitutions "due to the Jewish people from Germany and her allies."⁷⁹ Progress, however, was slow and the results disappointing. Only in June 1948 was a first Jewish organization recognized by the American authorities in Germany, the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization (JRSO), to deal with restoration of Jewish property in the American zone.⁸⁰

The recently created state of Israel constituted a new factor in the demand for restitutions, enjoying the advantages and levels of influence of a sovereign state. Israeli demands were presented in a note addressed not to Germany but to the Four Powers on March 12, 1951. It stated that the restitution and indemnification Germany owed to the Jewish people were so far unsatisfactory and more comprehensive legal and practical steps were required. The note distinguished between private compensation and collective reparation: the main bulk of material means the Nazis robbed belonged to the Jewish people as such because no individual survivors remained. The state of Israel declared its rights in the matter, as a representative of the Jewish people and as redeemer of many of the victims of Nazi persecution and survivors of the Holocaust. The total material losses of the Jews the Nazis caused were calculated at \$6 billion. Israel demanded now \$1.5 billion restitution from the two German states (\$1 billion from West Germany and \$.5 billion from East Germany) this being approximately the cost of the absorption in Palestine/Israel of half a million Jews who had been victims of Nazi persecution.⁸¹ Although not mentioned in the Israeli note, Israeli demands were well-known to be bound to stark economic realities. The young Jewish state was near financial collapse: its population had doubled in the first two years of existence, most of the newcomers arriving without material means or professional skills.

The U.S., British, and French answers to the Israeli note (the Soviet Union never replied) expressed understanding for the Israeli position but declared that they could do little to force the Germans and therefore suggested that Israel should present its claims directly to the German government.⁸²

That was easier said than done. As much as a direct approach seemed logical, the emotional impact of the destruction of European Jewry continued to reverberate in Jewish public opinion and strong opposition existed to any contacts with the Germans. In addition, whenever they were approached, representative German officials proved less than enthusiastic about the idea of reparations.⁸³ In Jewish and Israeli circles there was a growing concern that Germany, which six years after the end of the war was close to acquiring full sovereignty, might sidetrack the issue of restitutions.

Goldmann was convinced that the direct approach was the only way:

I have always maintained that nations must not let their relations be directed by emotion. Their own interests require them to find a way to live together and not be dominated solely by feelings, however justified these may be. . . . Only groups that do not engage in foreign politics and are aware of their powerlessness can allow themselves the easy luxury of living for emotions. The Jews did this during their centuries of ghetto and diaspora life, but a people that has succeeded in establishing its own state . . . can no longer permit itself such indulgence.⁸⁴

Yet, to enter in contact with the Germans was not only a matter of political logic, but also involved sheer personal daring. In 1951, only six years after the end of the war, no Israeli of political importance could have afforded to meet leading German officials. Indeed, during the critical months of the negotiations the Israeli government had to provide Goldmann with bodyguards.⁸⁵

Goldmann also saw a historical and intellectual argument for a renewed contact with the Germany that was emerging after World War II. He considered the Jewish-German encounter that had gradually developed since the early Middle Ages as a major factor in Jewish history. In the past two centuries, the German cultural influence was an essential element in the modernization of the Jewish people. Consequently, "the problem of the relationship between Germans and Jews is in this way a unique one, not only from the point of view of Jewish and German history, but also from a historically universal angle," Goldmann wrote, in one of his most thoughtful chapters in his memoirs. "Among the many contacts [of the Jews] during their millennial history there was none so influential but also almost critical for the Jewish fate as the meeting with the German people."⁸⁶ An extraordinary chapter of the German-Jewish relationship, both in the positive as in the negative sense, had begun in the nineteenth century and reached its climax in the twentieth century. No culture had shaped modern Jewry as the German one, Goldmann wrote, no other group had affected German life like the Jews, and the results of that interaction were amazingly productive: the three men who more than anyone else had shaped the conceptual structure of the modern world—Marx, Freud, and Einstein—had culturally been German Jews.⁸⁷ And then, the Nazi tragedy ended all that.