



Israel as a Jewish State – Religious and Secular Dimensions

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The Challenges of Jewish Secularization

The rise of modern Zionism during the second half of the nineteenth century is essentially connected with the major processes that marked European Jewish life during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The most notable of these are the Enlightenment and its Jewish version and counterpart, the *haskalah*^[1]; the process of secularization and its intellectual, political and cultural implications^[2]; the struggle for the emancipation and integration of Jews in the societies in which they lived; the emergence of national consciousness and national movements in Europe; and the steady growth of modern racial anti-Semitism. All these phenomena exerted a long-term influence on the Jewish community in general, and on Israeli Jewish society in particular. Indeed, to this day they continue to help shape Jewish identities and to determine the role of religion within these identities.

Beginning our discussion with an examination of the relationship between Zionism and the *haskalah*, it is important to note the difference between the type of *haskalah* seen in the German-speaking countries in the eighteenth century, on the one hand, and that which developed in the nineteenth century in Eastern Europe, and particularly in Russia, Poland, and Ukraine. German *haskalah*, prior to the French Revolution, was heavily influenced by the philosophical, political, and ideological discourse of the Enlightenment. Like its nineteenth-century successors, it strived to imbue Jewish existence with a new modern quality consistent with rationalistic humanistic ideals, while providing a framework for adjusting Jewish life in order to promote the integration of the Jews in European societies. Such integration necessarily involved an essential change in the role played in the lives of individual Jews by Jewish identity and religion. Rather than shaping the entire orientation and self-perception of Jews, these elements were now just one of the many factors that influenced them. Judaism, it was argued, should now be perceived merely as a religion, playing a similar role to that of the Christian religion among the majority population. The aspect of religion, which distinguished the Jews and the Christian majority, should not overrule the cultural, economic, and national factors that functioned in the opposite direction as integrating elements, positioning the Jews as potential partners in the general society. It was perceived as the best interests of the Jews that their Jewish identity will be limited, narrowed, and balanced by the other identity they are striving to adopt.

The Eastern European *haskalah*, though heavily influenced by its Western counterpart and clearly grounded in a similar philosophical and cultural discourse, took quite a different course^[3]. Russian and Polish Jews of the nineteenth century might have aspired to integration in »Europe« and to participation in the cultural and spiritual load this notion carried; however, they neither strove nor were invited to integrate in the local societies and cultures among which they lived. The Austro-Hungarian Empire, which ruled over a vast Galician Jewish population, adopted a middle way, seeking to »modernize« the Jews without actually inviting them to join general society, culture, and economics. Eastern European *haskalah* did not strive for a balance between Jewish and non-Jewish identity, but rather for a modernized and »upgraded« Jewish identity. Judaism was seen by the intellectuals of that branch of *haskalah* (the *maskilim*) as the cultural-religious civilization of the Jewish people rather than merely as a »religion« in the narrow sense. The Hebrew language

served them as the natural means of communication and as a vessel for their thoughts, beliefs, and research. Only towards the last decades of the nineteenth century did Jews begin to believe that emancipation might also be possible in the Eastern European countries.

Zionist thought developed complex relationships with these branches of *haskalah*. Zionist thinkers viewed Western *haskalah* and its successors as an attempt to justify and theoretically ground assimilation and the gradual weakening of Jewish identity. Modern religious denominations, particularly the Liberal and Reform movements and the newly emerging *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, were condemned for willingly adopting alien points of view and criteria and were seen as essentially apologetic in character.

The nature of Zionism as dialectically opposing these trends in modern Jewish existence is evident from the title one of the early Zionist thinkers chose for a work he authored during the aftermath of one of the waves of pogroms in Russia, namely »Auto-Emancipation«^[4]. The immediate context and content of this booklet is not our concern here. Its significance for our discussion lays in the antithesis its title assumes between Zionism and »emancipation«, in the sense of the aspiration to secure equal Jewish partnership in society, economy, and culture. In the wake of the pogroms, the writer believes that these ideals can no longer be realized within the European societies. The Jews should understand that focusing their efforts on the hope to be welcomed as individuals in these societies is senseless and even damaging. They should »take« emancipation as a people, as an independent society, rather than »receive« it from the societies among which they live. They must deepen their national Jewish identity, rather than limiting and diluting it in order to open the way to the general, non-Jewish society. Nevertheless, this slogan also expresses in a no less powerful manner that what the Jews should yearn for in this new, national context is actually quite similar to that which they have strived for as individuals in the old one: taking part in shaping a modern, enlightened culture and society, having full access to economic life and activity, and so forth. The clear contradiction between Zionism and Western *haskalah* and the movements that continued the ideals it embodied means that both were functioning on the same level, are anchored in similar philosophical discourse, and present a relatively similar social vision.

The various streams of Zionist thought continued the underlying notions of the *haskalah*, of modern *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, and even of the struggle for emancipation and the modernization of Jewish life. Zionist slogans closely corresponded to many of those proposed by the *haskalah* and emancipation Jewry. Accordingly, an attempt to delve into the questions of identity examined by Zionism should be anchored in an analysis of the roots of the struggle for emancipation.

The Jewish yearning for emancipation did not center on merely material goals. Entering »general« European society was understood as providing access to an entire cultural and social world which the *maskilim* considered superior to that which they enjoyed in the pre-emancipation ghetto. Jews and non-Jews alike have understood the move toward integration in general society as involving essential changes in Jewish life-style, education, professional occupations, and attitudes toward non-Jewish society^[5].

Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), the first and most prominent philosopher of the *haskalah* in Germany, viewed philosophic and cultural partnership between Jews and Christians as valuable from a Jewish point of view^[6]. Though he believed that Judaism's particular character was manifested by religious law^[7], he made clear that this particular Jewish phenomenon is based on a universalistic demand for human morality, self-perfection, and reason – a demand shared by all the monotheistic faiths. Mendelssohn's own philosophical engagement, as well as his close friendship with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), formed a central layer in his Jewish identity precisely because of the fact that in these areas he was acting, thinking and believing as a *Mensch* rather than merely as a Jew^[8].

The same can be said of Mendelssohn's disciple, Hartwig Wessely (Naftali Herz Wiesel,

1725–1805), whose efforts focused on the need to modify Jewish education by limiting the place afforded to traditional Jewish content in the definition of an »educated Jew«. Wessely believed that this particular content should be balanced by, and integrated in, a modern, enlightened cultural whole. This change was needed foremost for the sake of Judaism's own development^[9].

These perceptions reflect the profound influence of the process of secularization. Since the Renaissance, European Christian societies have witnessed a major shift in the role religion might play in personal, social, cultural, and political life. Prior to the Renaissance, religion was *the* dominant life-factor defining the role of all other human dimensions and activities, or at the very least, the demand was that it should function as such. Now, it was no more than one of the many factors that shape human life. Even when it was perceived as essentially important, true and divine, the basic fact remained that other factors, unrelated and independent from it – science and academic research, art and literature, culture and politics – played a decisive role in fashioning human life. Furthermore, once religion lost its role as the whole that designs personal identity and the nature of society and state, it became a subject of other »wholes«, namely domains claiming to shape and interpret human life. The history, psychology, and sociology of religion are only some of the disciplines that claimed to explain in a secularized context the essence, development, and qualities of a phenomenon that had previously been perceived as the organizing power that might award life with meaning and value.

It should be noted that only through these developments the notion of civil society could emerge. Only through the new understanding that religious identity was no more than one layer of person's identity could the question be raised whether Jews should be invited into »general« society. In order for such a notion to be introduced, the Jew had to be seen as a human being whose identity is not fully defined by his religion; to a no lesser extent, society had to be perceived as more than merely »Christian«. Only if individual and social religious identity, clearly dividing the Christian majority and the Jewish minority, is perceived as balanced by other, essentially significant identity layers that might portray these two parts of society as potential partners, it is possible to ask which of the two – the separating or the unifying layer – should prevail. Jews were fully aware of their debt to this shift, though not always of its full implications. Striving for emancipation meant welcoming secularization. This was true for religious as well as non-religious Jews; for the Orthodox as well as for liberals; for those who expressed it only implicitly as well as for those who fully and explicitly expressed their views.

While the process of secularization alters the character and role of religion, the reverse is also true: the nature and course of secularization are influenced by the specific religious tradition to which it is applied. As each religion undergoes a process of secularization, it experiences its own specific and unique form of reorientation. Jewish secularization was certainly heavily influenced by its Christian counterpart, but nevertheless it developed within Jewish society and was shaped by the cultural and religious character of this society. The fundamental difference between the Christian secularization experienced indirectly by Jews, since they resided in essentially Christian societies, and the Jewish secularization they experienced directly, is anchored in two structural features of the Jewish religion. Both made secularization in particular and modernization in general a unique challenge for Jews and for Judaism^[10].

The first feature is the absence in Jewish tradition of a domain similar to that which has always been regarded by Christianity as the profane. Over the centuries, Christianity developed a clear distinction between the worldly and the heavenly; between that which should be rendered to God and that to be rendered to Caesar^[11]. The secular domain might have been perceived as inferior, potentially dangerous or evil, but its separate existence and its substantial influence on human beings were never questioned. The impact of Christian secularization was a radical and extremely powerful shift in the balance between the secular and the sacred. This change positioned the worldly, the sensual, and the sexual as valuable and as independent from religion and its judgment. Nevertheless, Christian secularization did not face the challenge of creating *ex nihilo* an

entirely new domain in human experience. Jewish secularization, by contrast, was required to create the secular *ex nihilo*: to assign areas of human experience previously perceived as sacred as elements of this invented domain. It had to invent the notion of culture, to define sexual passion as detached from the sacred, and to create a notion of art and literature that would be detached from religion[12].

A characteristic illustration of this process was the perception of the Hebrew language developed by the *haskalah*. In general, a clear hallmark of the enlightenment was, on the one hand, a deep appreciation for the classical languages, and, on the other, the new place given through the process of secularization to »secular« languages such as Italian or German. Both of these new directions awarded value to non-sacred, non-theological languages and literatures. The *haskalah* operated in the same direction with regard to Hebrew. The first generation of German-speaking *maskilim* maintained the highest regard for this language and viewed an excellent command of Hebrew as the mark of a highly-cultured, educated Jew. More over, the *haskalah* regarded Hebrew as a classical language, opposed the habit of Orthodox writers of using it in a slovenly manner, and demanded a serious attitude towards its grammar, history, and sources. Moreover, the *haskalah*, particularly in Eastern Europe, established Hebrew periodicals and promoted the writing of poetry and prose in the language – steps that clearly prepared the ground for the future Zionist secularization of Hebrew[13]. The essential difference between this Jewish phenomenon and its European counterpart and inspiration is that in this case it was the traditional holy language that was secularized and defined as »classical«, not alternative languages[14]. The secular, worldly and modernized was created on the sacred tongue and its literature. The new was planted in the very midst of the old, the revolutionary at the heart of tradition.

This phenomenon became fully apparent several generations later with the Zionist attempt to develop a full-scale secular Hebrew language. The deliberate secularization of terms originally deeply rooted in the sacred domain was seen as a liberating act and as a symbol of the new course Jewish culture was taking. The term »Israel's keeper« [*šhomer yisrael*] now referred to the military organizations rather than to God; the building housing the Israeli military organizations rather than to God; the building housing the Israeli parliament[15] was given the name *mishkan*, originally used to refer to the

Divine presence among the Israelites in the desert; the term *ge'ula*, redemption, came to be used to describe efforts by Jews to purchase land in the Land of Israel, to return it to Jewish possession, and to facilitate Jewish settlement; the term *avoda* originally referring to God's worship was understood now as labor, and foremost as agricultural work.

A parallel and related phenomenon is the development of the modern Jewish perception of the Hebrew Bible. It is no coincidence that the first modern Jewish Bible interpreter, Benedict Spinoza, was a sharp critic of religion in general and of the Jewish religion in particular. He used the Bible as a powerful tool in defending the legitimacy of his radical philosophical views, some of which sharply contradicted basic tenets of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Spinoza's *Political Theological Tractate* attempts to prove that these views do not in any way undermine the teaching of the Bible – or, more precisely, the teaching demanded by Biblical prophecy. Freeing the reading of the Bible from traditional pre-assumptions would give way to a liberal, modernized, and clerical-free notion of social, political human existence[16]. Most of *Haskalah* thinkers did not fully adopt Spinoza's philosophic agenda, and certainly not his hermeneutic emphasis. Nevertheless they, as well as the nineteenth century spokesmen of Liberal Judaism and the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, adopted Spinoza's notion of the Bible and its free, open reading as the grounding for modern, secularized Jewish existence[17].

Moses Mendelssohn's translation of the Hebrew Bible, and even more so the modern exegesis he and his students authored, placed the struggle for a renewed understanding and role of the Bible at the center of the modernization of Jewish life, in keeping with the ideal and spirit of the

haskalah[18]. It did not take long before the Hebrew Bible became a major resource for modern, secular prose and poetry[19], sculpture and painting, theatre and music, philosophical thought and scholarly academic research. It was thus expropriated from religion's sole possession. Through Biblical criticism, contemporary philosophies and ideological development, Judaism's most basic text, the very text that served for centuries as the heart of the Jewish sense of sacredness, revelation and God's presence, became a cornerstone of secular Judaism.

A parallel shift in the role of the Bible was effected by a whole series of liberal Jewish theologies expressing the spirit of Reform Judaism. Liberal theologians and philosophers, such as Abraham Geiger, Samuel Hirsch, Salomon Ludwig Steinheim, Hermann Cohen, and Leo Baeck, struggled with rabbinical Judaism's authority and even more so with medieval Halachic Judaism. They based their perception of Jewish tradition on the Biblical prophetic message, portraying Judaism as »ethical monotheism«. The Hebrew Bible was now perceived as *the* authoritative and formative layer, rather than the Talmudic and Rabbinical literature, not to mention the mystical tradition. It was the Biblical, prophetic message that defined that this tradition was understood as the eternal essence of Judaism, that ever-lasting quality which was to be manifested and realized in the many changing ways and forms through which Judaism was progressing.

These theologians adhered to a clearly religious perception, albeit one that was heavily influenced by, and anchored in a secularized worldview. They interpreted prophecy more as a revelation of human spirit than as divine inspiration in the traditional sense. The prophetic message was read and judged through the ethical and philosophical notions they had adopted. Accordingly, Biblical prophecy was admired as a dimension of religious culture, anchored in human morality and Jewish spirituality, and as a major step toward the full realization of the quality represented by the human being. Precisely through this interpretation, Judaism was imbued with its unique religious quality. This secularized religious formula related closely to the methods, findings, and readings developed through Biblical criticism[20]. The authority of the sacred past interconnected with the challenges of the worldly present to create what was perceived as the correct contemporary form through which to manifest the eternal: the re-formed appearance of God's ancient message in our lives; the human interpretation of the prophetic encounter with the Divine.

Secular Zionism's perception of the Hebrew Bible is deeply grounded in both tendencies. It enthusiastically adopted and empowered the secular reading of the book, which it regarded as a great cultural and spiritual work of the Jewish people. The Bible was seen as one of the most essential manifestations of the Jewish people's attachment to its homeland and of its historical claim to this land. Anchoring oneself in the Bible was seen as a primary way to be re-rooted in the nature and landscape of the re-settled homeland, in the Hebrew language and literature, and in the heroic epochs of Jewish history. None of this implied that the Biblical narrative was in any sense accepted as a »true« historical testimony, or that the repeated claim of dialogue between the Divine and the human was seen as anything more than a naive and mythical expression of human and national spirit. Neither did it imply that the secular Zionist observed the Biblical laws, and still less so the rabbinical edicts traditionally referred to as the Oral Law.

From the liberal religious reading of the Bible, the Zionists adopted the perception of Biblical prophecy as carrying a universalistic and eternal calling, anchored in Jewish being but directed at humanity as a whole. Through the secular prism, ethical monotheism came to be seen as the foundation for the prophetic message of Socialism. Israel's election was re-invented in the secular call for the special international and social responsibility Jews, and the Jewish state, have to take upon themselves. When secular Zionist thinkers expressed their profound belief that the future Jewish state would serve as a model for a better humanity, they revealed the depths of their debt to the liberal religious tradition – a debt that was not always acknowledged.

Thus the Bible played an analogous role to that filled by »classic« literature, discovered or invented, in many national movements. Contrary to the general pattern seen in other movements, however,

in the Jewish case this newly-founded literature, re-read through modern secularized eyes, was none other than a major religious source on which Jewish tradition had been grounded for centuries. There was hardly a secular sphere to be re-evaluated. The newly-defined secular had to be invented; it was found in the very midst of that which had hitherto been understood as sacred, Divine and religiously authoritative.

These two phenomena – the creation of modern, secularized Hebrew and the new perception of the Hebrew Bible, both anchored in the *haskalah* and fully developed later by secular Zionism – exemplify the unique course Jewish secularism has taken. In both cases, it is not merely a matter of reevaluating pre-existing secular elements, but rather of the ex nihilo creation of a secular sphere by »robbing« essentially sacred elements that previously played a major role in Jewish religiosity, and charging them with new, mundane content.

In both of these cases, the new, secularized perception competed with the traditional one that continued to serve parts of non-secularized Jewish Orthodoxy[21]. The same is true of the historical narratives adopted by various Jewish groups. It is often the case that a central element of the historical narrative developed by one national movement contradicts parallel narratives reflecting the historical consciousness of a neighboring and competing movement. Such a sharp conflict exists between the Zionist and the Palestinian historical narratives relating to both ancient and modern times and touching on matters of immediate political urgency as well as aspects of theoretical consciousness. Within the confines of Judaism, however, the Zionist narrative, deeply anchored in the secularized *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, also had to compete against the traditional religious narrative, which embodied its own perception of Jewish existence. The Zionist narrative emphasized the Biblical and second temple period[22] rather than Rabbinical and mediaeval ones. It spoke more about kings, heroes, poets and prophets rather than rabbis, philosophers and mystics, let alone *Hallachik* authorities; it told the stories of wars, political struggles and great cultural movements rather than about religious movements and writings. It was a story anchored in the Land of Israel rather than a story telling about exilic life in the Diaspora. It was a narrative based on scholarly historiographic and archaeological work rather than one based on traditional authoritative religious sources and mythical pastmemory.

Both narratives served a contemporary Jewish consciousness and a present-day ethos. Both reflected the unique place history plays in Jewish tradition and its tendency to locate God's presence in it – the traditional narrative in a direct and explicit manner; its modern counterpart in a secularized and dialectic form. These same common aspects also delineate the sharp division between the two. The new, secularized historical narrative did not emphasize a neglected sense of historical continuity and national heritage, but rather aimed to replace an existing, well-attributed religious one. Thus, by way of example, secular Zionist culture re-formed the Passover rite in order to charge it with national content. By celebrating a secular Seder while telling the traditional story of the exodus from Egypt, they claimed these traditional elements and values, imbuing them with secular and social significance[23].

The other feature in which the fundamental difference between the Christian secularization and the Jewish one is anchored is classic Judaism's religious-national nature[24]. Contrary to the other monotheistic traditions, Judaism as a religion essentially appeals to Jews alone, i.e. to the members of a specific *people*. Regardless of contemporary debates about ancient Judaism's attitude toward the conversion of Gentiles[25], it is evident that from the medieval period on, that is to say throughout all the relevant pre-modern generations, Jews did not attempt to manifest Judaism in circles external to the Jewish people. The identity Jews have carried comprised an indivisible combination of ethnic, cultural, and religious elements. It would never have occurred to pre-modern Jews that one could separate their affiliation to a »Jewish faith community« from their identity as part of the »people of Israel«. The »we« of their prayer book referred simultaneously to God's worshippers, to those to be redeemed at the end of days, to those who carry in their being the history of God's nation, and to the praying community[26]. The notion of the Divine covenant

between God and Israel was seen simultaneously as grounding Israel's peoplehood and his religious commandments.

In its effort to demarcate and limit the domain of religion, and to position this as just one of many aspects of culture and identity, secularization raised a whole series of questions Jews had never previously asked themselves. Due to the combined religious-ethnic nature of their identity, secularization challenged not only Jewish identity's religious aspects, but also, and simultaneously, its national dimensions. By weakening and limiting its religious components, and by presenting these as no more than a partial portrayal of personal and communal identity, secularization weakened and essentially limited the ethno-cultural identity of the Jews.

For the surrounding Christian societies, there was a strong bond between secularization and the rise of national consciousness. This two-dimensional development presented national identity as a complement or substitute for religious identity. For the emancipated Jew, striving to be part of the »general« society, now defining itself in national terms, this reality spawned difficult dilemmas and a sense of unease.

Some Jews – including the main streams within nineteenth century Reform^[27] and Modern Orthodoxy – attempted to fully separate their religious Jewish identity, interpreted as a merely personal and communal matter, from the »general«, non-Jewish national identity they energetically adopted. Accordingly, they interpreted the role Jewish religion should play in their lives in a similar manner to that in which the secularized non-Jewish society among which they lived understood the role of the Church. Another large group of Jews yearned to fully adopt the new national identity offered by the surrounding society and were ready to abandon Jewish religion altogether, or at least to minimize dramatically its role in their lives. Hoping to integrate in cultural, social and political life, they sought to be fully accepted as »normal« members of the ethnos they were living amongst. Both popular attempts had a substantial impact on modern Jewish existence. Both were challenged by external as well as Jewish internal development, and both were rejected by Zionist thinkers.

The Zionist options were based on reviving a holistic sense of Jewish national identity^[28]. Zionism adopted the secularized national idea, but rather than directing Jews to find their national identity in the society in which they lived, it strived to develop a separate Jewish national entity that would provide the Jews with the same framework provided by the national movements of other peoples. By so doing, and by immigrating to the Jewish homeland, European Jews disconnected themselves from their old affiliations, on the one hand, while on the other they internalized within their renewed Jewish national identity the dilemmas and challenges that originally faced Jews as the result of secularization. The unique manner in which Jewish secularization has placed the religious-national question would henceforth form the heart of the new society they developed in the Land of Israel, and later in the Jewish state. The Zionist »solution« itself could in no sense defuse this problem; it might even have deepened and exacerbated it.

Diaspora Jewish existence is inherently partial and fragmentary. Jewish communities all over the world do not perceive themselves as responsible for the integral quality of the societies in which they live. Unresolved issues and internally-contradictory formulas might well be seen as an acceptable and sometimes even fruitful part of such an existence. Israeli Jews, as the majority within their own state, must directly and fully confront the complex issue of Jewish identity delineated by secularization. In the context created by the Zionist idea, the question ceases to be one of personal and communal identity and becomes a structural one touching on the very nature of Israeli democracy. This question impinges on the daily lives and civil rights of various Jewish groups, as well as those of the non-Jewish minority groups, particularly the Palestinian citizens of Israel. It raises basic dilemmas of religious versus state authority, and has far-reaching implications for the manner in which Israel addresses an entire range of international issues, such as her conflict with the Palestinians in particular and the Arab world at general, or the dilemmas provoked

by the occupation of territories, believed to be integral parts of the Land of Israel but claimed by the Palestinians and by Syria. This core identity question shapes Israel's perception and its role for world Jewry and dictates the significance attached to its existence by its own citizens.

Secular Zionist approaches to Jewish tradition

The ways in which various Zionist factions address this issue is anchored in the early, formative period of the Zionist movement. The early waves of Zionist immigration to the Land of Israel during the first two decades of the twentieth century, known in Zionist historiography as the Second and Third *Aliyyot* (waves of immigration), came essentially from Eastern Europe, where the majority of the contemporary world Jewry was concentrated. Most of the immigrants had grown up in *shtetls*, small towns with a high proportion of Jewish inhabitants. The Jewish life they left was traditional, economically marginalized, and culturally underdeveloped. Joining the Zionist movement, very much like joining the Jewish-Socialist Bund party or the cosmopolitan Communist groups, was a clear act of rebellion. The Zionist Jews longed for a »healthy« life, free from what they saw as the pathological symptoms of exilic existence, and anchored in a new Socialistic and national sensibility. Planting a new seed of the Jewish people in its homeland was seen as the first step in this daring and idealistic journey. The quality of the society and culture they would build there seemed to be the real yardstick of its success.

This was the context in which they debated the role of religion. The dominant strand combined a total negation of Jewish exilic life and of Jewish religion. They believed that the desire to revive healthy, productive Jewish life, rooted in the Land and in the struggle for social justice, must be based on a complete eradication of all the symptoms of the traditional Jewish religion. Precisely because religion was – and is – such a major component of Jewish identity, of the kind of Jewish identity one should free oneself from, an uncompromising war should be waged against its influence on life, culture, and society. According to the most sophisticated spokesman of this worldview, the writer and thinker Yosef Haim Brenner (1881–1921), it is only a strict secular foundation that can allow the creation of a new self and facilitate the securing of a new rootedness in the Jewish land^[29].

The new Jewish existence they were striving for was a »normal« national one, based on history, culture, and language. The religious aspect, which had characterized Jewish existence throughout the ages, was to be seen as no more than a historical fact^[30]. The presence of Ultra-Orthodox Jews in the land, alienated from the Zionist idea and from the social ideals to which these groups of young pioneers adhered, served only to highlight still further the gulf between old religious existence and the secular, mundane existence that formed their objective. Accordingly, their war against religion was a holy one: a war for the sake of the new, mundane Jewish existence.

Such a holy war cannot be waged for long. Only those who were educated within traditional Jewish society, possessing the wide knowledge inherited through the learning of Jewish tradition, could load their anti-religious sentiment not merely with the sense of freedom and human sovereignty, but also with deep Jewish meaning. When they neglected various elements of Jewish life, such as the Sabbath, holidays, and *kashrut* (Jewish dietary laws), this constituted a conscious act of rebellion. They carried in their very being that which they were freeing themselves from. Jewish religion *did* play a role in their identity, albeit a negative one. The religious literary sources were indeed part of their linguistic and literary load, even when they were deliberately used in a secular manner. Subsequent generations, educated according to this worldview, no longer possessed this knowledge and experience and could not fully relate to these religious dimensions. Rather than rebellious, they were ignorant in this regard; rather than waging a holy anti-religious war, they were simply alienated. They were called upon by their educators to develop a notion of secular, national Jewish culture that would be truly detached from religious dimensions. Again and again they have failed to do so, proving through their failures that the total and comprehensive

negation of Jewish religion and its relevance can hardly constitute by itself a foundation for a fruitful and vital Jewish identity. Many of them have felt the need for a new connectedness to that which their ancestors have abandoned, though not necessarily a religious one.

The prevailing anti-religious sentiment described above was not the only approach found among influential secular Zionist thinkers or among the first waves of Zionist immigration to the Land of Israel. An alternative view was offered by thinkers such as Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginsberg, 1856–1927)[\[31\]](#) and Haim Nachman Bialik (1873–1934)[\[32\]](#). They did share with the thinkers discussed above the sense that Judaism and the Jewish people must go under a deep and essential process of renewal. They also shared the belief that such a renewal could happen only in a non-exilic context, i.e. as part of the Zionist project in the Jewish homeland, and that this takes place on a secular, cultural basis. But in contrast to Brenner they rejected the idea of a rupture-based renewal or a total departure from all that Jewish tradition had developed throughout the ages. Re-rooting the people in its land should certainly substantially change its self-perception, lifestyle, and culture; but it should not imply the rejection of Jewish tradition altogether. The renewed Jewish existence we should strive for must be a dialectic continuation of the old one. The revived secular Jewish culture should be grounded in the infrastructure created throughout the ages by religious-national Jewish culture. Its qualities should echo those of the old unique creation of the Jewish people. Zionist education must provide the young generations with knowledge of Jewish tradition and literature, access to its inner rationale, and an acquaintance with its rituals and life expressions[\[33\]](#).

This formula was much more deeply rooted in Judaism's basic characteristics, and hence ostensibly offered a productive model for the long-term evolution of a Jewish Zionist society. However, it suffered from a substantial ambiguity in terms of its realization, in terms of the actual content of education curricula and the day-to-day meaning of such an approach. Certainly, relative to the one-sided anti-religious approach, it lacked a clear definition of its possible political implications and of the actual manner in which its delicate and finely-balanced identity could be manifested in political life[\[34\]](#).

A unique example of this line of thought was the philosophy of Aaron David Gordon (1856–1922)[\[35\]](#). Highly admired and influential among the pioneering groups of the Second *Aliyyah* with whom he lived and worked, Gordon developed a complex philosophy that blended prophetic-Socialist elements, a liberal romantic nationalistic view, and a deep commitment to the renewal of Jewish life in the Jewish homeland. He believed that Zionism should strive for a profound change in Jewish life and culture, and that rerootedness in the Land of Israel must involve a process of healing from the parasitic, unproductive lifestyle of exile. Gordon refused to adopt Brenner's view that such a process should or could take the form of a total and complete detachment from everything created by Jewish tradition. On the contrary, he believed that re-rooting the Jewish self in the Jewish land would imply the renewal of Jewish culture, society, and religion. Though he lived and worked among the strictly secular Second *Aliyyah* pioneers and was alienated from most of the spheres of activity of traditional Jewish religious life, he was not only a firm advocate of Jewish religiosity but also a religious man and a student of key aspects of Hassidic religiosity. Gordon saw the bridging of the gap modern culture has created between human and nature, and the revival of a form of sensitivity to human existence he called life-perception (*chavaya*), as the basis for a new and healthy life, for the formulation of a responsible particularistic-universalistic national view, and for the reflowering of the Jewish religion.

In this version of the secularized Zionist approach, religion is understood not merely as a significant resource for the development of secular Jewish culture in the Jewish homeland, but rather foremost as an essential component of this future culture. The Jewish religiosity Gordon envisioned would not be institutionalized in the manner of traditional Judaism, but it would nevertheless constitute a dialectic continuity of Jewish tradition. The exact form it would take, as well as its political, social, and educational implications, remain somewhat ambiguous. The deep

belief in the interconnectedness between the renewal of Jewish life and religion allowed him to refrain from addressing these questions. He was much clearer when considering social, cultural and political issues; the religious question would be naturally resolved once life was renewed. This ambiguity encouraged a common tendency among the secular Socialists who were influenced by Gordon to ignore the religious dimension of his thought, and to interpret his approach broadly in line with the secular thinkers discussed above. It certainly robbed his thought of much of the potential contribution it could have made to addressing the dilemmas future generations have met concerning the role of religion in Israeli Jewish society.

Other non-Orthodox voices were barely heard, and still less listened to, in the pre-state Land of Israel. The Reform and Conservative movements were almost completely absent from the Jewish public in the Land of Israel until the last third of the twentieth century. Even then, it took several decades before their voices started to be heard, and to this day they were marginalized and succeed to attract only a relatively small minority. Non-Orthodox religious Zionist thinkers such as Martin Buber (1878–1965)[\[36\]](#) and his disciples were quite influential in the German-speaking, Central European Zionist context, but much less so in the Jewish homeland, and particularly not in regards of the religious dimension of their thought. In the political field they gained some importance in terms of the presentation of an alternative, moderate response to competing demands and interests of the Palestinian national movement. On the intellectual level, they clearly influenced the emerging academic life of this young society. They were involved in social and moral discussions, representing a broadly social-democratic and progressive direction. But their religiosity, which was the heart and pivot of their worldview, was generally regarded as a personal preference reflecting their foreign upbringing and irrelevant to the Israeli context.

This state of affairs among the non-Orthodox and largely secular majority of the Zionist public in pre-state land of Israel, and later in the State of Israel, played a decisive, though not exclusive, role in shaping the Orthodox attitude toward Zionist revolutionary vision and politics. Ultra-Orthodox Judaism objected fiercely to this new interpretation of Jewish existence and Judaism, which it viewed as an enormous threat and challenge to »loyal«, traditional Judaism. Zionism was no less negated than Reform Judaism. The establishment of the Zionist state forced them to accept practical solutions that would assure their autonomous communal existence, but it did not change their underlying ideological opposition to Zionism[\[37\]](#).

More significant to our discussion was the other Orthodox response to Zionism, namely joining the new movement and building the intellectual and religious means to bridge between this essentially secular enterprise and Orthodox religious conviction and commitment. The first Religious-Zionist strategy, developed by Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines (1893–1915)[\[38\]](#), was based on a clear distinction between traditional religious messianic expectations on the one hand and the mundane political task of the Zionist movement on the other. Like Herzl, the forefather of political Zionism, Reines understood this task as being to lift the Jews away from the distress of anti-Semitism (or Judeophobia, to use Herzl's term), and to remove them from the existential threats they faced. Questions of Jewish culture and identity, and hence of the role religion might play in Jewish life, lay beyond the mandate Zionist organizations should take upon themselves and should be left for the various Jewish denominations. This culturally neutral ground allowed for cooperation between Orthodox Jews, loyal to Jewish law and to their interpretation of Jewish tradition, and secular rebellious Jews. The religious significance of Zionism lies in the miraculous awakening of national consciousness among the secular, assimilated Jews, seen by Reines as providential and as lying beyond any regular historical logic. In turn, this phenomenon encouraged the hope of a subsequent religious awakening, manifested in the rise of Jewish consciousness among those who had previously been almost totally lost for the future of Judaism.

This was indeed a powerful formula, allowing far-reaching cooperation between Herzl and the new Zionist religious faction. Herzl could genuinely claim to be representing the cause of the entire Jewish people, and not merely of one of its factions. The Orthodox could combine loyalty to their

religious commitment with active participation in the new and mainly secular Zionist enterprise. But as powerful and effective as it was in the short term, it would prove powerless in the long term. The World Zionist Organization could maintain cultural neutrality, at least to a certain extent, but there was no way that the new Jewish society in the Jewish homeland could do so. It was obliged to cope with issues of identity and culture, as well as with educational dilemmas. Zionism's success in creating a new reality in the Land of Israel could not fail to raise the very questions regarding which Reines had hoped the movement would remain neutral. Unsurprisingly, it was not long before Reines' formulation lost its support among those Orthodox who sought to maintain their Zionist approach.

The second and most influential formula was based on the thought of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi in the Land of Israel. Kook took an extremely serious view of the secular and anti-monistic approach of the Zionist pioneers of the Second and Third *Alyot* [39]. From his Orthodox standpoint, their approach was dangerous and an act of extreme rebellion. In dialectical terms, however, this same negative development was not only needed in order to heal religion from its impure elements, but also constituted a sign of the imminent coming of the Messianic age. Secular Zionists believed that they were departing from religion and from sacred history; Kook argued that they were merely unaware of their role as loyal servants in the Divine plan for redemption. Kook's legitimation for Orthodox collaboration with secular Zionism was not based merely on a common practical interest to save the Jews and provide them with safety and stable ground. His position saw ostensibly secular Zionism as nothing less than a religious messianic development, even if those involved had no idea of this reality.

For several generations, this formulation seemed to be perfectly adequate for the Orthodox Zionist minority. In contrast to the formula proposed by Reines, it allowed them to participate fully and enthusiastically in all aspects of the Zionist effort and in the political, social and even cultural life of the young Israeli state; their contribution to Israel's defense is profound and their role within the Israel Defence Forces has been steadily growing. The Orthodox Zionists could perceive themselves as a hidden vanguard, hinting to the real direction toward which the majority was unwittingly leading; in the eyes of many – leaders as well as laity – this is still the case.

The price paid for this approach became visible only later, when an increasing dissonance emerged between political decisions and developments and the assumed messianic momentum on which Kook's formula was based. The 1967 war could still be viewed as a step towards full redemption through the full realization of the unconscious agenda Zionism was supposed to represent. The occupation of territories strongly associated with the Jewish religious attachment to the Land of Israel, such as Hebron and Bethlehem, could easily be seen as an apparently mundane development that in reality marked a further step toward messianic redemption. The same was true for Sinai, the Gaza strip and the Golan Heights. Liberated from alien hands they were seen as a new frontier for Jewish settlement, namely for a further step towards full messianic redemption. Once Israeli democracy determined to give back some of these territories – in 1974, 1978, or 2005 – this messianic formula faced a profound challenge. Secular Zionism refused to fulfill the role allotted to it by this messianic interpretation; it »betrayed« a covenant, Kook has believed to view them bonded to, though into which it had never consciously entered.

Orthodox Zionists find themselves at a crossroad, forced to reinterpret the essence of their Orthodox Zionist identity. Some adhere to the classic formula, confident that this will be vindicated by events in the long term. Others have adopted a radical right-wing perspective that has a nationalistic yet post-Zionist character. They view the secular democratic state Zionism has created as no more than a vessel for a messianic kingdom. Convinced that the direction this democracy is choosing is inconsistent with the redemptive Divine plan, they now question the legitimacy of this unfaithful and ineffective vessel. In its most radical expressions, this direction gives room for semimilitary and terrorist activities. Others still seek a less comprehensive view that allows them to continue their Modern Orthodox way of life. They depart, even when only partially

and not fully consciously, from the formula Kook and his school have offered^[40].

This conundrum lies beyond purely political questions; it relates to the type of Jewish identity which seems to deny all that Orthodox Zionists perceive as the heart of Jewish existence. This question touches, too, on the acute question of the hierarchy between state laws and religious duties, and between judicial and rabbinical authorities. Many Orthodox Zionists feel trapped between their loyalty to civil and religious authorities; between the ideal of full participation in the supposedly sacred state and their redemptive eschatology. While many are managing to maintain both sides of this axis, fewer sense that they can do so on the basis of a stable and satisfying formula. This brief analysis of the main trends within the Jewish pre-state society in the Land of Israel suggests that none of the formulations they offered for the role of religion in Jewish national culture and politics has proved stable, fruitful, or satisfactory in the long term. Sooner or later each of the offered formulas was found unsatisfactory and questionable by at least substantive part of its adherents. The detachment from the various formulas has not always been expressed explicitly and openly, but it can readily be perceived by means of a sociological examination of the fabric of Israeli Jewish reality.

It is important to note that broadening our discussion to include later phenomena, introduced to Israeli society only in the generations after the birth of the State of Israel, does not substantially change that picture. Such later phenomena include the enormous impact of mass immigration from Islamic countries, which introduced Israeli society to an essentially different model of traditionalism and secularism. One might also analyze the farreaching challenge Israeli Jewish society has faced in the attempt to create some form of coexistence with the large minority of Palestinian Israeli citizens – a challenge that raises essential questions concerning ethnicity, citizenship, equality and identity^[41]. Even more visible is the impact of the occupation of Palestinian (and Syrian) territories throughout most of the years of Israel's existence. The occupation has fueled both internal and external debate relating to the oppression of a large population that demands freedom and self-determination, on the one hand, and the strong attachment to parts of the land essential to Jewish ancient history, on the other. On a different level, Israeli Jewish discourse has been heavily influenced by the mass immigration from the Former Soviet Union, composing almost twenty percent of the total population of Israel. For most of these immigrants, whether they are fully Jewish or not, Jewish identity is strictly ethnic and cultural, basically detached from religious dimensions. This presence is broadly balanced by the parallel and dramatic growth of the Ultra-Orthodox community, together with its growing political strength, positioning this sector as a major factor in Israel's economy, culture, and policy-making process. All these are important factors; none of them has substantially changed the picture described above or offered any stable and broadly acceptable formulation for the role of the Jewish religion within Jewish state and society.

Religion and state in contemporary Israel

Ideology, politics, and sociology interrelate in complex ways. When the State of Israel was born, her leaders, despite their allegiance to a strictly secular, Socialist ideology, were nevertheless deeply aware of the political need for a modus vivendi with the Orthodox section of the young Israeli society. Faithful to Herzl's tendency to create coalitions with the Orthodox-Zionist Mizrahi party, Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, reached status quo agreements with the Ultra-Orthodox leadership. This move, which has shaped the Israeli body politic ever since, was perceived at the time as no more than a tactical and opportunistic move. Ben-Gurion clearly believed that it was only a matter of time before these weakening religious sectors would shrink dramatically. A temporary compromise seemed the best way to assure stability for the dominant, governing social-democratic secular major ity.

Nevertheless this tactical formula brought together in the same room the most secular factions, which ostensibly advocated the gradual annihilation of all the religious dimensions of Jewish

identity, and various Orthodox circles who claimed to represent the sole valid interpretation of Jewish essence, identity, and commitment. This political reality rapidly became a sociological factor suggesting a profound duality in the psychosociological consciousness of many Israeli Jews. They were secular and had very little to do with religious life, and they were happy with the secular nature of their society and state. At the same time, they sensed that Jewishness – whether or not they wanted to have any part in it – was represented by the Orthodox, the »real« Jews they were not any longer. Political cooperation between the Orthodox and the secular social-democrats turned into a deep sense of dependence of the latter, the vast majority, on the former minority. The interconnectedness of cultural-national elements and religious dimensions, which had marked Jewish tradition throughout the ages, was now manifested as a political bond between those who were responsible for the state and culture and those who had the authority to define what Jewishness is really all about.

From the late 1970s, when the social-democratic parties lost their parliamentary majority in favor of right-wing, also essentially secular parties, the balance has shifted even further to the Orthodox side. The Orthodox Zionists were now perceived by a large section of the non-Orthodox public as the primary voice determining not only what is »Jewish«, but also what is »Zionist«. Trapped in its own conflict of identity, as discussed above, Orthodox Zionism can hardly be expected to engage in such a mission in a manner that can ease tensions and offer a formula suitable for the majority of Israeli Jews, let alone non-Jewish Israelis.

More than one hundred years after the first Zionist formulations, and more than sixty years after the establishment of the State of Israel, the issue of the role of Jewish religion in the secularized national Jewish movement and state is far from being solved. On a daily basis, it is true, Israeli society, as well as the state's institutions, have found ways to deal with this unresolved issue. Nevertheless, many observers view it as one of the most acute and dangerous challenges facing Israeli society in the long term. The analysis presented in this paper clearly suggests that none of the formulations offered by the various dominant groups within the Zionist movement or within Israeli society can provide a stable, acceptable, and productive formula in this context. Furthermore, the political arrangement designed by Israel's secular leaders in the early years of the state, and further developed in recent decades, has done nothing to encourage a reasonable environment in which fruitful discourse can take place on issues of identity. On the contrary, the greater the impact of the existing power struggles on the Israeli public, the less room remains for the ongoing social and spiritual discussion of these issues.

A future resolution seems to be possible only through a clear separation between the political and social dimensions constituting state institutions, religious life and cultural developments. When Theodor Herzl, the fore father of political Zionism, expressed his vision of a Jewish state in which state and church would be separated in a similar way to that in secularized Christian modern societies, there were those who saw this as reflecting a lack of understanding of the unique complexities of Jewish identity. Today, however, such a formula should be accepted as a practical basis for this unresolved dilemma. Freeing religion from political power will enable it to play a positive role for religious Jews of all denominations, for secularized Jews who wish to engage seriously with Jewish culture and identity, and for the non-Jewish publics who share equal citizenship in a country defined as the national home of the Jewish people. It might also encourage the emergence of Liberal Jewish religiosity as well as secular tendencies deeply devoted to enriching and blossoming of Jewish culture, two of the most promising directions within the contemporary Jewish society in Israel. Such an environment might further allow Jewish religious tradition to contribute to the search for peace and compromise in the Middle East, alongside with the neighboring religious and cultural traditions. Reaching such a *modus vivendi* is surely to be one of Israel's most demanding and acute challenges.

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