

# THIS IS ONLY THE FACT, BUT WE HAVE THE IDEA: SOLOMON SCHECHTER'S PATH TO ZIONISM

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*In 1905, after much hesitation, and in spite of significant opposition from lay supporters of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Solomon Schechter declared publicly his allegiance to Zionism. This essay explores his path to that occurrence, and argues that three factors influenced his course of action. First, the events of 1904 and 1905: Herzl's death, the Russian pogroms in the fall of 1905, and the continuing interest in territorialism, all of which suggested a need for leadership and a program that could unify world Jewry. Second, Schechter's rethinking of his antipathy for Herzlian political Zionism, which he opposed as irreligious, but which now struck him as less salient than Zionism's utility in the fight against Jewish assimilation. Third, Schechter's emergence as a communal leader, which led him to consider new platforms from which he could propound his views on manifold issues in Jewish life. This represented a significant change from his years in England, when he held many of the same ideological positions, as revealed in personal correspondence, but circumstances and his own role were quite different.*

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Despite his prominence, Solomon Schechter remains a relatively neglected figure in the scholarship concerning modern Jewish life.<sup>1</sup> The same may be said for his path to, and involvement in, Zionism as an ideology and as a movement.<sup>2</sup> This lacunae is even more surprising considering the widely held generalization that Conservative Judaism and its intellectual leadership centering around the Jewish Theological Seminary prominently advocated and worked on behalf of the Zionist cause.<sup>3</sup> This essay explores Schechter's thought and actions regarding Zionism. As a case study, it focuses on his life in the years leading up to 1905, when in December he formally joined the ranks of the movement.<sup>4</sup>

Here we will seek to explain the timing of his 1905 declaration. How did he respond to certain events at that time, with the end result being his publicly proclaimed commitment? The importance of Schechter's 1905 statement lies not only in its impact upon Zionism or American Jews, but also in what it reveals about his life's course, given the reality of a certain consistency and continuity of his views on the problems of Judaism and of Jews, stands which he had elaborated for at least the decade prior, in private and in his writings.

Three things help account for the announcement of his formal allegiance to Zionism: first, the circumstances of 1905, including the leadership vacuum created by Herzl's death in 1904, the pogroms afflicting Russian Jewry in the fall of 1905, and the concomitant desire for a unified American Jewish response to the challenges facing world Jewry; second, Schechter's previous hesitation to pledge allegiance to Zionism, which reflected his religious view of Judaism, which in turn informed his positions on contemporary issues like nationalism, and created a deep antipathy on his part for Herzlian political Zionism; and third, his personal odyssey, which saw him evolve from a prominent yet frustrated *Wissenschaft* scholar with no defined public role in Anglo-Jewish affairs, to a leading religious educator and public intellectual in New York, the emerging center of gravity in world Jewry. In short, his views on Zionism did not significantly change through the years; circumstances and context did, which in turn altered his emphasis, seeing Zionism as a force for unity and an antidote to assimilation, rather than avoiding it on the basis of its many secular proponents and its lack of commitment to a rabbinic worldview.

## The British Years

The rise of modern Zionism, that is the movement of modern Jewish nationalism, coincided with Schechter's life story. The convening of thirty-two Romanian chapters of Hovevei Zion in December 1881 took place in Schechter's hometown of Focsani. His twin brother Israel numbered among the first adherents, settling Zichron Yaakov in 1882.<sup>5</sup> Some of Schechter's earliest writings, public and private, displayed interest in Jewish nationalism, in its historical and current modalities. Indeed, his chapter "The Kingdom of God (National)," which he delivered at Gratz College as a lecture in 1895, and then published in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* that same year, reveals the intimate relation of the scientific study of Jewish civilization and the search for a usable past, the intersection of the religious, the historical, and the current as Schechter conceptualized the problem.<sup>6</sup>

The title betrays Schechter's fundamental belief and premise: Jewish nationalism, as traditionally understood, is inconceivable without God. Similarly, the notion of God's Kingdom is inconceivable without Israel — the Jewish people. The universal realization of God's sovereignty, i.e., the Messianic era, includes the redemption of the people Israel, the land of Israel, and the Temple. Israel is the political representative and manifestation of God's Kingship, a powerful counterpoint to the mundane nationalisms represented historically by Esau, Amalek, Edom, and Rome, which in Schechter's mind continued to the present as embodied in contemporary European nationalism.

Israel is not a nation in the common sense of the word. To the Rabbis, at least, it is not a nation by virtue of race or of certain peculiar political combinations. As R. Saadya expressed it, "*Ki umateinu eynenah umah im ki betorateinu*" "Because our nation is only a nation by reason of its Torah." The brutal Torah-less nationalism promulgated in certain quarters, would have been to the Rabbis just as hateful as the suicidal Torah-less universalism preached in other quarters. And if we could imagine for a moment Israel giving up its allegiance to God, its Torah and its divine institutions, the Rabbis would be the first to sign its death-warrant as a nation.<sup>7</sup>

In this utterance Schechter made plain his opposition to the manifold nationalisms of the day as he articulated what Jewish nationalism must be: it was not the romantic notions of organic

peoples as it had degenerated into pseudo-scientific understandings of racial differences; but it was also contrary to the twin Jewish fallacies represented by radical assimilationists who denied the national character of the Jews, and the secular nationalists who easily divorced Jewish peoplehood from Jewish tradition. For Schechter, they were inseparable, religiously and historically. In contrast to the assumption that this essay signalled Schechter's opposition to Jewish nationalism, this author contends that it qualified his support by defining it both in terms of what it affirmed and what it rejected.<sup>8</sup>

What was also clear was Schechter's conservative view of history, revealing the continuity and necessity of tradition, and more importantly for Zionism, that it could not be transcended. Schechter did not elaborate how and whether the Messianic era could be hastened, stressing only that the future had to be prepared on the basis of the past.

It is this kingdom...with both its material and spiritual manifestations, that Israel is to express and establish. With this, it enters upon the stage of history....In the establishment of its institutions, in the reign of its law, in the peace and happiness of its people, the world would find the prototype and manifestation of these ideals in which universal holiness would be expressed.<sup>9</sup>

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, Schechter viewed Zionism as problematic precisely because its entrance on the world stage was — in Herzlian terms — a function of politics, diplomacy, philanthropy, public opinion and marketing.

As Schechter's correspondence with Herbert Bentwich, a leading figure in Anglo-Jewish society, prominent Zionist, and a financial patron of Schechter's Readership at Cambridge, attests, Schechter found in Herzlianism the antithesis of his own worldview. Herzl advocated philanthropic and political activity; Herzl himself was secular, without Judaic learning; his vision of a Jewish state was a state of the Jews, without any distinctive Jewish cast, resembling a European bourgeois society in an age of European imperialism, the premises of which politically and culturally he accepted.

In an explanation justifying his absence at the second Zionist Congress in 1898, Schechter explained to Bentwich:

I have neither time for it, nor am I as you know Zionist enough for such a mission, though I shall rejoice at everything you will do except extreme Herzlism. You must first have the colonies and then the nation.<sup>10</sup>

Instead of constituting the object of philanthropy and politics, Schechter saw Zionism as the slow upbuilding of colonies, for the purpose of reviving the Jewish national consciousness. Settlement was imperative.

I say again that the *Hovevei Zion* must not think that pence and shilling collection are much good. If they want to do really something for the land they must settle there. *Maschiach* cannot be brought by proxy...I do not care a farthing for the new saints in it. It remains for me the land of the Bible.<sup>11</sup>

Schechter had spent his entire life studying and living Judaism. His vision was informed by the injunction to be a *goy kadosh*, a nation unlike all other nations. Though he prized Britain's democracy, he remained wary of its imperialist status, and rejected it as a model for Jewish settlement in the land of Israel.

We are not Anglo-Saxons and I can hardly understand how Jews can join in all great political questions when England actually plays the part of old crusaders....With regard to Palestine I should like to see Jewish men and women of higher culture and religious zeal settle there. This would be the salvation of both the colonies and the Jewish communities in the great cities. They ought not be Rabbis but practical men of real experience of life and its troubles. They ought also to make bold front against the nihilism which is a prominent feature in Russian Zionism.<sup>12</sup>

Jewish difference — in Schechter's eyes — vis-a-vis European nationalism stemmed not only from religious doctrine, but also from the downtrodden status Jews possessed in European life, a status that Schechter had learned as a child in Romania, and which was never far from his consciousness as he moved to the West. In his concern over the future of Judaism, Palestine held itself out as a possible remedy, however dimly.

We want — if we should pass through this terrible crisis — an *idea* and an ideal to live apart...and Zionism will do for the present. It is no use deceiving ourselves. We are *Gerim* and must look out for a home. Whether Palestine would under present conditions be the best home is doubtful, but with all its material drawbacks it has the spiritual advantages just to form an *idea* and ideal.<sup>13</sup>

Schechter rejected kingdoms forged upon "Blood and Iron" in place of what he termed "spiritual imperialism" accompanied by the

"Open Door" beckoning to the nations of the world. His use of such terms no doubt alluded to the nationalism and colonialism of the German and Western varieties of the day.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most profoundly, Schechter's historiosophy differed significantly from the Zionist view of history. He believed that Judaism was fundamentally about historical continuity, not discontinuity; hence history could not nor should not be transcended. The past prepared the way for the present, and the future was an extension of this process. In his writings Schechter continually emphasized the necessity of painstakingly creating a national consciousness, reviving the Jewish ideal in an age of assimilation and apathy. In this regard Schechter's approach to the problems of Judaism resembled Ahad Ha'am. They both believed that the nurturing of a cultural elite was the necessary first stage in the creation of a Jewish national consciousness. But Schechter, unlike Ahad Ha'am, never viewed the theological foundation of Jewish life as fundamentally different from a viable vision of Jewish national culture. Schechter's Positive-Historical historicism was far more conservative than Ahad Ha'am's historicism.<sup>15</sup>

That the building of such a nationalist vanguard required patience and zeal could be learned from world history, as Schechter reminded Bentwich. These qualities could not be manufactured overnight, certainly not by donning tuxedos and calling one's group the "World Zionist Organization."

Greece had a share of God's earth and free air and has still not reproduced Homer. To produce Isaiahs...requires not only a certain given spot in our globe but also a certain point in history....New points in history have to be prepared. The rebuilding of the Temple was prepared by the purifying process of the Babylonian captivity and the prophets....Where are our prophets? As long as we have not men of the prophetic stamp we cannot hope too much. In other words: There will be no redemption without the proper preceding preparations of the captivity.<sup>16</sup>

Political Zionism, by contrast, represented a sharp break with the traditional historiosophy and teleology of Jewish life. *Galut* required transcendence and rejection, not just materially, but philosophically. Jews had to thrust themselves back into history, not based upon the past, but in distinction to it.<sup>17</sup> Herzl, no doubt, would have agreed with the comment of a follower of Mazzini, who wrote in the 1850s, "We have created Italy, now we must create Italians."<sup>18</sup> Schechter would have advocated precisely the reverse sequence. Only a willingness to view history as discontinuous, as something to

break with radically, could permit such a worldview. Many in the political Zionist camp held such views; they were anathema for Schechter's rabbinic-centric worldview.<sup>19</sup>

For all of these reasons, despite Schechter's keen interest in current Jewish affairs, his personal connection to the land of Israel through his brother's life there and the importance of Zion in his own belief system, Schechter avoided joining the Zionists for all of his years in England. Arguably his philosophy incorporated a certain detachment from activism, which was at the core of the very notion of a "movement." The fact that *Hibbat Zion* in Britain had been supplanted by Herzlian Zionism meant that for Schechter, the glass was half-empty, not half-full.

By virtue of this mentality, Schechter appears similar to those English Zionists who committed what Stuart Cohen termed a "tactical error" in not realizing the importance of public gatherings such as the First Zionist Congress in Basel. Such equivocation — what Cohen called "the awkward 'yes-buts,'" might be the more well thought out position from an abstract theoretical view, but did it effectively cede the dynamism of Jewish nationalist activity to Herzl and his followers? Schechter seemed unwilling or unable to consider this factor.<sup>20</sup>

Beneath these real differences over the tactics, strategy, and vision of Zionism, Schechter's reluctance reflects, as well, his own personal travails in this period. His correspondence, and to a certain extent his "Epistles to the Jews of England," reveal a person looking to exercise a type of leadership through his learning and writing, a role that was not truly possible for Schechter in the British context. Just as Jewry lived in exile, Schechter described his own existential situation as exilic, mirroring the declining fortunes of European Jewry. His professional problems — in his eyes — became metaphors for his Jewish problem, and by extension the Jewish problem.

The real question is whether the University [Cambridge] would do anything for me. It is not a question so much of money as having some recognition from an institution for which I have done so much. But I am afraid both we and our science (Jewish learning) are in Galut even in England. This is the point which embitters my life even more than the comparative poverty with which we have to struggle.<sup>21</sup>

Anglo-Jewish society and religious leadership revealed a strong hierarchy, epitomized by the Chief Rabbinate and the United Synagogue. Schechter, though an ordained rabbi, held no such official position. Anglo-Jewry had an elite: the Montagues, Montefiores,

Rothschilds, and the like, what one writer termed “The Cousinhood,” which was significantly inbred through generations of marriage.<sup>22</sup> Schechter was a foreigner, who spoke English with a heavy Eastern European accent. More galling for him was that this elite was based upon money, not upon learning, the traditional Jewish rival to material goods in the hierarchy of Jewish cultural values. His learning was respected, but it could not be adequately appreciated in such a society. It certainly could not be a powerful argument for his playing a leadership role, even after the Cairo Genizah finds made him much better known. Inside the academy, as well, Schechter’s position frustrated him: not a Fellow of a college at Cambridge — the equivalent of tenure — he possessed only a Readership.

Many thousands of pounds were spent by the University this year in additional salaries but none thought of me, nor do they think of compensating me with a fellowship though they all admit that I have done great things for them and that my college has all cause to be proud of me. But I am a Jew and there is I am afraid no hope for me.<sup>23</sup>

In this environment Schechter sought out the company of other eminent Cambridge scholars such as James Frazer who were also marginal — lacking either a fellowship or tenure or both. Indeed, Stefan Reif has written of Schechter that his closest colleagues in his Cambridge years typically consisted of such peripheral figures in the Cambridge world.<sup>24</sup>

In Schechter’s case, the University allowed him to teach, but the position was funded by outside figures, most importantly Claude Montefiore, his former pupil, prominent Jewish writer, and increasingly a proponent of views that Schechter abhorred. The reality that his colleagues respected him paled before the constant reminder that Schechter lived from hand to mouth at the sufferance of an elite which would never include him in providing leadership for the Jewish community. By contrast, his correspondence reveals that in addition to financial security and the possibility of a better Jewish environment for his children, America beckoned to him as an attractive possibility precisely because it held out the promise of intellectual and communal leadership.

There is no need for me in the Jewish community...except for you and your dear wife the matter will be considered as a “happy release” all round. None asked me to reconsider the matter, whilst my chief supporters — as far as cheques go — I am convinced — only too anxious that I would make room for a good

Britain....I am no influence among the Christians here. The utmost I have are two pupils in the average...whilst in New York, I may become P.G. a great power for good through the Seminary and my public position. I may become there if I am worthy...the saving of conservative Judaism. From a letter received lately from N.Y. I can see that even the reformers promise themselves a revival of Judaism if I come there.<sup>25</sup>

This letter to Herbert Bentwich summarizes all that Schechter sought: financial and professional prominence and independence, intellectual and religious leadership and influence. In his eyes England would never yield such fruits; only in the New World, in a still developing Jewish world like America was there a possibility. It was in that different context that Schechter would revisit the Zionist enterprise and his role in it.

## America

When Schechter came to America in May 1902, his immediate concern was the Seminary: its faculty, students, and curriculum. He proceeded to institute a new course of studies and new requirements, dismiss the teachers he found objectionable, hire teachers of his own choosing, and begin making the Seminary a center of the American Jewish religious world, and a player in the emerging American Jewish community. As Jonathan Sarna recently wrote, all of these goals presumed a vision of the *Wissenschaft* scholar as communal leader, based upon one's learning, one's writing, one's self-conception incorporating the importance of culture and scholarship in the leadership and formation of a community.<sup>26</sup> The Seminary, in Schechter's view, was not only to be a school for training English-speaking modern American traditional rabbis, it was to be a source of a new, albeit traditional, vision for the creation of a rich Jewish culture and community in the West. Schechter fervently hoped that others would accept the Seminary's new leadership, enabling American Jewry to unify under the banner of *Wissenschaft* study and commitment to tradition. He hoped this would include Reform and Orthodoxy.

Such unity did not occur. Much of Schechter's correspondence in his first few years in office dealt with the problems of being in the center of the spectrum, sandwiched between Reform and Orthodoxy, particularly the growing East European variety, attacked on either side. Throughout, Schechter wrote less about Zionism, con-

tinuing to sound the same notes about Zionism as a “moral force,” not a political or philanthropic movement. He insisted that as bad as the sufferings of Eastern European Jewry were, Jews could endure physical and political oppression, as long as they had their beliefs; the destruction of their traditional values and community most alarmed him, without which he doubted they could survive as a viable moral force. Jewish nationalism without such Judaic values was more bad than good, in his opinion. This included the territorialists, epitomized for Schechter by Israel Zangwill, an associate from Schechter’s years in England and erstwhile Herzlian, who advocated the twin evils — as Schechter perceived them — of assimilation and a Jewish nationalism independent of attachment to Palestine.

If Zionism means admiration of Israel’s past, hope and faith in its future, devotion to the national literature and reverence for the national institutions — if Zionism means this...then I am trying in my humble way to be a Zionist....I have neither the money nor the practical mind to deal with such questions and I must leave their solution to men who give better proof of their practical abilities than I. The fact is that the great danger threatening Judaism is not coming from the poor and persecuted. Judaism has survived many a massacre and was only strengthened by it. It is the majority of the prosperous classes with their indifference, with their rage for assimilation, with their aping the Christians which furnishes the church with new converts and destroys Judaism. To provide these classes with a Jewish country — or rather to convert their cosmopolitan homes into Jewish homes is much more important than to discover a new continent for the Russian emigrants....I have spent nearly fifty years on the study of Jewish literature and Jewish history and am deeply convinced that you cannot sever Jewish Nationality from Jewish Religion. The destruction of the latter will end in the destruction of the former. Zionism must begin at home if it really wishes to be a power for the good.<sup>27</sup>

But the activism implicit in the reality of a “movement” still eluded Schechter; he was clearly more comfortable viewing Zionism in somewhat abstract and intellectual terms, as a kind of cultural vision, without necessarily possessing the means for realizing his desired ends. Then came Herzl’s death in the summer of 1904.

## Life After Herzl

For all of Schechter's disagreement with Herzl, he termed his death a "great calamity." Schechter understood that Herzl had provided leadership, even if fundamentally flawed in its vision and strategy. The question of who would succeed Herzl defied easy resolution: the Jewish world was divided geographically, economically, politically and religiously. Schechter supplied his own description of a would-be Zionist leader, who suspiciously sounded like himself.

It will require more than the usual abilities to manage the Russian Jews who are wanting in all faculties of organization and very much bent to *machlokot*. A mere great Rabbi will not do, as the future leader will also have to command the respect of the Germans and the English and Americans who insist upon culture and secular education. Just at present I cannot think of the really suitable person. It must be a great man and even a better *Jew*.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to writing a personnel description that fit him, in that same letter Schechter let drop that he had been "thinking of joining it [Zionism] soon." We cannot know what precisely occasioned his change of heart about actually joining the ranks of Zionism, but his emphasis appears to have shifted: in the American context the issue of assimilation became increasingly paramount to him precisely because he was now an institutional figure, a religious leader in a community spiritually at loose ends. At Cambridge assimilation had not been *his* problem in his role; in America religious apathy was his problem. He could therefore say, "I was lately spending a good deal of time making propaganda for the movement among the Jewish aristocracy here. I insisted particularly on the spiritual and moral side of it as the best antidote against assimilation."<sup>29</sup> He also made a similar sounding statement to the *American Hebrew*, which had tried to draw him out on the subject of Zionism by asking him to reply to a report that he had come out as a Zionist in the spring of 1904. He replied in the negative, though differentiating between the Herzlian and Ahad Ha'amist versions, the latter of which he affirmed.<sup>30</sup> Evyatar Friesel maintained that the Seminary group of Ahad Ha'amists, including Schechter, differed from Ahad Ha'am in their religiosity, as well as their sanguinity about the prospects for Judaism in the diaspora. Their practical efforts — in terms of building American Jewish community — suggest the unity of their social and spiritual agendas.<sup>31</sup>

By 1904 then, Schechter was evolving as a communal leader. This process of personal and professional development involved the incorporation of Zionism as a force to be utilized for the sake of his institutional and communal interests. Many of those gathered around him, most notably Israel Friedlander and Henrietta Szold, were declared and active Zionists. Seminary lay supporters such as Louis Marshall and Jacob Schiff were not Zionists, to be sure, but their opposition, like Schechter's, was principally to political Zionism. Schechter argued the case for religious/cultural Zionism on utilitarian grounds: Zionism spurred Jewish renewal; Jewish peoplehood and the land of Israel stood at the center of any putative reinvigoration of Jewish culture.

Schechter's verbal and political sallies sought to position the Seminary as the vital center of American Jewry, appealing both to American Jews who might be attracted to an emphasis on Jewish peoplehood, as well as to East European immigrants who sought an Americanized traditionalism. In so doing he thought to seize the initiative against many Reform thinkers, who opposed Jewish nationalism and in contrast to the Orthodox, regarded by many as not up to the task of creating a viable traditionalism in America.<sup>32</sup> Zionism of the spiritual variety thus enabled Schechter to argue the Seminary's putative communal leadership: upholding Americanism and Judaism as congruent, traditional Jewish values and signalling a palpable concern for the suffering of the Jewish people. As his correspondence with Zangwill, noted above, makes clear, territorialism suggested not only that political Zionism lacked Judaic content, but that it was too weak in the wake of Herzl's death to make the case for Palestine as the only possible locus of Jewish national activity. That alternatives were even being proffered suggested the imperative of leadership and the fragility of the nationalist enterprise.

Viewed in that context, the events of 1905 — the renewal of pogroms in Russia and the ensuing outcry in American Jewish circles for a unified response, and the continuing efforts of the territorialists, who included such Schechter associates as Cyrus Adler and Mayer Sulzberger — no doubt steeled Schechter to make his public affirmation of Zionism in December of that year.<sup>33</sup>

First, in the wake of the pogroms, funds for pogrom relief, self-defense, Zionism, and new Jewish organizational unity numbered among those tactics advocated in the American response to the events in Russia. Jonathan Frankel argued that the general Zionist group, centering around the Federation of American Zionists, which included Seminary figures, exercised disproportionate influence in American Jewish public life because of its heterogeneous makeup

including American-born, Russian emigres, and new arrivals. Its advocacy of cultural nationalism included "develop[ing] theories of "ethnic pluralism," also added to its prestige in a period when the philosophy of the melting pot was coming under challenge." This strategy and outlook describes Schechter's approach at that time.<sup>34</sup>

Second, Schechter continued to fret about the lure of territorialism, no doubt confronted with it in the persons of Seminary lay leaders and financial supporters such as Jacob Schiff and Mayer Sulzberger. Though he had dismissed it in 1904 as "not a great success here,"<sup>35</sup> he continued to view it somewhat as both strengthening the hand of secular, political Zionism, and as a tragic diminution of the power of the land of Israel in Zionist efforts. Less than two months before his Zionist declaration, Schechter reiterated his unequivocal opposition to any alternative to Zion for Zionism.

The majority in Basle gave expression to the conscience of Israel which would prefer semi-starvation in the Holy Land to riches in any other part of the world....Zionism with Palestine is an ideal worth living and dying for; without it Zionism means nothing, and is bound to do injury. Any autonomous State of Jews outside of Palestine means the destruction of Judaism and an utter break with all our traditions....It is altogether a matter of life or death for us to get rid of these traitors.<sup>36</sup>

When he finally spoke out in a public Zionist forum it was clear that he was in debate with territorialist notions. Without mentioning it or its advocates overtly, it was nevertheless an enticing, yet dangerous delusion against which he felt compelled to speak. In that statement, he anticipated many of the points he would make a year later in his pamphlet, "Zionism: A Statement."<sup>37</sup> He acknowledged:

"...a great longing among us for unity and union, but there could be no unity without a common ideal as a basis. This common ideal was the promise of the prophets. Zion and Jerusalem....The ideal of Zionism was the establishment of a unity, which unity could only be established by the strengthening of the Hebrew language, Jewish symbols, and Jewish institutions."<sup>38</sup>

All of these were goals to which the Seminary was devoted as well. He used the occasion to seize the high ground in the conflict against those he termed advocates of "Prophetic Judaism" and "Universalism," terms he routinely employed when speaking of Reformers, arguing that their interest in Judaism as missionary

activity required a center from which such efforts would emanate. This place was Palestine, *contra* the territorialists.

[W]here every stone is a sacred memory, where every piece of ground is a subject of holy inspiration, where every ruin speaks sacred history — only there the Jew could acquire this enthusiasm and religious zeal which make the missionary expose his life to all sorts of dangers in performing his holy mission."<sup>39</sup>

But these were points Schechter had advocated for years. What had made him change his mind about Zionism as a movement? For all of its flaws, he adduced from his personal experience that it *was* raising Jewish consciousness, which he had always seen as a primary goal. He recounted his recent visit to Berlin, after an absence of twenty-five years, in which he found Jewish students to be proudly affirming Judaism, and discussing Jewish matters. They evinced interest in Jewish affairs, synagogue life, Jewish texts and Hebrew language. All of this Schechter attributed to the positive influence of Zionism, however defined. According to the newspaper account of Schechter's speech, Schechter now thought "that whatever aspect Zionism may take it would re-act for good on the Jewish religion."<sup>40</sup>

Although he continued to inveigh against political Zionism, with its imitation of qualities he denigrated in European nationalism, Schechter now saw Zionism in a more positive light. It was a unifying force in Jewish life; it operated as an antidote to assimilation, and it enlisted the support of the heterogeneous Jewish world in a way that other ideological movements could not do. Through it Schechter hoped that Jewish consciousness would be raised, in fact it was already being elevated, so that the Jewish renewal at the heart of his mission would be fulfilled. It also provided for him personally yet another platform to stake his claim as a communal leader, a visionary whose commitment to rabbinism could inform manifold areas of contemporary Jewish life. Zionism for Schechter reflected his rabbinic worldview, and his emerging sense of his own leadership role in American Jewry. He overcame his aversion to "movements" in part because though he had resisted the notion of Jewish partisanship, and hoped fervently to unify American Jewry, in reality he was building his own centrist party in American Jewish life via the instrumentality of the Seminary and its rabbis. Zionism aided that effort by providing yet another platform for Schechter to promote a vision of Jewish peoplehood that was consonant with American Jewish life and Americanization.

When would that vision be realized? Schechter closed his address with an anecdote, a conversation between an Austrian and an

Italian in the wake of the failed Italian revolution of 1848. The Italian patriot said to the Austrian, "You have not defeated us." "How so?" exclaimed the Austrian, "have we not beaten your armies, dispersed your Societies, and imprisoned your leaders?" "Oh, no!" retorted the Italian, "this is only a fact, but we have the idea!"<sup>41</sup>

Facts were a problem for Zionism: fledgling, weak colonies, meager diplomatic and financial successes, the leadership vacuum, and profound differences of vision. But it was serving a valuable purpose for diaspora Jewry, raising Jewish consciousness, unifying heterogeneous elements of the community, dovetailing with Schechter's agenda at the Seminary. The fact that an idea is not necessarily the same as discrete action was not overly problematic for Schechter, since his rabbinic theology was less than activist in its reading of Jewish history and teleology, and ideas were the substance and form of his leadership style.

### Postscript

There is much we still do not know about Solomon Schechter's relationship with Zionism, particularly how he and other religious leaders propounded and legitimated Zionism within the American Jewish community. But we do know that from 1905 until his death in 1915, Schechter lived in continuous, albeit part-time, engagement with the Zionist idea, now as an insider. For all of his commitment, he continued to make the case for what Zionism should be, and what it must not be. The spectacle of European nationalism blundering into the cataclysm of World War I convinced Schechter of the tragic aptness of his forebodings about the problematics of secular, political and romantic notions of nationalism. He feared for Zionism, concerned that it too would degenerate into a mere Jewish, not Judaized, version of the European bacillus. For all of his ambivalence, however, he had entered a new stage with his declaration in 1905. He was now a committed, if critical, Zionist. For Schechter, Zionism was an idea whose time had come.

### Notes

1. The only full-length biography of Schechter is Norman Bentwich, *Solomon Schechter: A Biography* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1938).

2. See Robert E. Fierstien, "Solomon Schechter and the Zionist Movement," *Conservative Judaism*, vol. XXIX, no. 3 (Spring 1975):3-13; Mordecai M. Kaplan, "Solomon Schechter and Ethical Nationhood: A Personal Memoir," *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly*, vol. XXXVII (1975):349-352; David B. Starr, "We Cannot Escape History: Solomon Schechter and Zionism," *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly*, vol. LV (1993):65-82.
3. According to one of its proponents, Conservative Judaism "asserts that the national sentiment which is part of Judaism must be acknowledged and so Conservative Judaism has gone hand-in-hand with Zionism since its inception." See Mordecai Waxman, ed., *Tradition and Change: The Development of Conservative Judaism* (New York: Burning Bush, 1958), p. 15; Herbert Parzen, "Conservative Judaism and Zionism, 1896-1922," *Jewish Social Studies* (October 1964); Simcha Kling, "Zionism in the Early Days of Conservative Judaism," in *Perspectives on Jews and Judaism: Essays in Honor of Wolfe Kelman*, ed. Arthur Chiel (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1978); Baila R. Shargel, *Practical Dreamer: Israel Friedlander and the Shaping of American Judaism* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1985); Arthur A. Goren, ed., *Dissenter in Zion: From the Writings of Judah L. Magnes* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1982), pp. 15-17; Ben Halpern, *A Clash of Heroes: Brandeis, Weizmann and American Zionism* (New York: Oxford, 1987), pp. 87-88.
4. *The American Hebrew* (hereafter *AH*) December 29, 1905, editorial announcement, pp. 201-202; "Dr. Schechter on Zionism," pp. 207-208.
5. David Vital, *The Origins of Zionism* (Oxford: Oxford, 1975), pp. 88-94; Charlotte Schechter Levy, "Solomon Schechter — Roumanian Notes," in Jewish Theological Seminary Library (hereafter *JTS*), Schechter Archives (hereafter *SA*), 101-119.
6. *AH*, vol. 56 (1894-95):320; "Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 7 (1895):195-215; later published as "The Kingdom of God (National)," in *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1909), pp. 97-115.
7. Schechter, "The Kingdom of God (National)," in *Some Aspects*, pp. 105-106.
8. See Evyatar Friesel, "The Meaning and Influence of Zionism on the American Jewish Religious Movements," (Hebrew) in S. Almog, J. Reinhartz, and A. Shapira, eds., *Zionut V'Dat* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 1994), p. 210.
9. Schechter, "The Kingdom of God (National)," in *Some Aspects*, p. 114.
10. As early as 1894, Schechter wrote to Bentwich, "Do not allow Herzl to have all his way!!" Schechter to Herbert Bentwich, July 6, 1894, Central Zionist Archives (hereafter *CZA*), Herbert Bentwich Archives (hereafter *HBA*), 100-159. Schechter to H. Bentwich, August 9, 1898, *CZA*, *HBA*, 100-159.
11. Schechter to H. Bentwich, March 1, 1898, *CZA*, *HBA*, 100-159.

12. Schechter to H. Bentwich, May 11, 1897, CZA, HBA, 100-159.
13. Schechter to H. Bentwich, May 23, 1897, CZA, HBA, 100-159.
14. See "The Kingdom of God (National)," pp. 106-108. Schechter made the reference contemporaneous in a letter to Cyrus Adler, in the wake of the Spanish-American War in 1897, "I can get as little enthusiasm for Pan-Saxonism as for Pan-Germanism. The over-emphasizing of the race principle will be the destruction of our people," quoted in Norman Bentwich, *Solomon Schechter*, p. 103.
15. As Steven Zipperstein wrote, "His [Ahad Ha'am's] affirmation in "*Lo Zeh Ha-derekh*" that the land had become "the goal of our hope, our people, the anchor of our faith" represented then, a challenge of the first order to traditional Judaism. This challenge...envisioned a transcendence of religious Judaism with the revival of the Holy Land as the primary focal point of Jewish aspirations. The *Haskalah* had historicized religious rituals. What Ahad Ha'am claimed was more radical: that religion's prominence had always been provisional, a notable but by no means abiding detour in Jewry's passage through time." See Steven J. Zipperstein, *Elusive Prophet: Ahad Ha'am and the Origins of Zionism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 35, 81, and *passim*.
16. Schechter to Bentwich, October 8, 1897, CZA, HBA, 100-59. See also the letters of Schechter to Bentwich, May 11 and 23, 1897, in note 8.
17. Ben Halpern, *A Clash of Heroes*, pp. 5-6.
18. Quoted in E.J. Hobsbawm, "Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914," in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 267.
19. David B. Starr, "We Cannot Escape History: Solomon Schechter and Zionism," *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly*, vol. LV (1993):65-82.
20. On the declining fortunes of the Hovevei Zion in Britain vis-a-vis the Herzlian camp, see Stuart A. Cohen, *English Zionists and British Jews: The Communal Politics of Anglo-Jewry, 1895-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 34-46.
21. Schechter to Bentwich, September 18, 1899, CZA, HBA, 100-59.
22. Chaim Bermant, *The Cousinhood: The Anglo-Jewish Gentry* (New York: McMillan, 1972).
23. Schechter to Bentwich, September 18, 1899, CZA, HBA, 100-159.
24. Stefan Reif, "Jenkinson and Schechter at Cambridge: An Expanded and Updated Assessment," *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, vol. XXXII (1990-1992):279-315, 290 and *passim*.
25. Schechter to Bentwich, October 23, 1899, CZA, HBA, 100-159.
26. Jonathan Sarna, "Two Traditions of Seminary Scholarship," unpublished essay.

27. Schechter to I. Zangwill, February 27, 1904, JTSA, SA, 101-106. On Schechter's explicit opposition to territorialism, see below, note 35.
28. Schechter to Bentwich, July 7, 1904, CZA, HBA, 100-160.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *AH*, April 15, 1904.
31. Evyatar Friesel, "Ahad Ha'amism in American Zionist Thought," Jacques Kornberg, ed., *At the Crossroads: Essays on Ahad Ha-am* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), pp. 133-141.
32. Though Schechter, consistent with his penchant for polemic, and no doubt for political advantage, chose to disregard the phenomenon of prominent Reform figures such as Stephen Wise, Richard Gottheil, and others, who were in the vanguard of American Zionism. See Michael Meyer, "American Reform Judaism and Zionism: Early Efforts at Ideological Rapprochement," *Studies in Zionism*, no. 7 (Spring 1983):49-64; Yaacov Ariel, "Kaufmann Kohler and His Attitude Toward Zionism: A Reexamination," *American Jewish Archives*, vol. XLIII, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1991):207-223.
33. In the case of Adler and Sulzberger, their associates, the group of prominent "Uptown" Jews, including Jacob Schiff and Oscar Straus, expressed interest in Jewish colonization in Mesopotamia and Syria, rather than necessarily in the East African proposal put forth by Britain, and advocated by Zangwill and the ITO. See David Dalin, "Cyrus Adler, Non-Zionism, and the Zionist Movement: A Study in Contradictions," *AJS Review*, vol. X, no. 1 (Spring 1985):55-88.
34. See Zosa Sajakowski, "The Impact of the Russian Revolution of 1905 on American Jewish Life," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, vol. XVII (1978):54-118; Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, & the Russian Jews, 1862-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 484-486.
35. Schechter to Bentwich, November 30, 1904, CZA, HBA, 100-160.
36. Schechter to Norman Bentwich, October 13, 1905, CZA, Norman Bentwich Archives, A255/444.
37. See *AH*, December 28, 1906. Published in pamphlet form by the Federation of American Zionists, December 28, 1906. Reprinted in Schechter, *Seminary Addresses and Other Papers* (Cincinnati: Ark Publishing Co., 1915), pp. 91-104.
38. "Dr. Schechter on Zionism," *AH*, December 29, 1905, p. 207; *AH*, January 12, 1906.
39. "Dr. Schechter on Zionism," p. 207.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*, p. 208.