

Truth, Confusion and Bread

A Polemic from the
Dawn of Zionism

Like so many historic geniuses compressed into one-liners, the great Hebrew essayist Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginzberg) has been canonized as the father of "spiritual" Zionism. This label reflects Ahad Ha'am's focus upon the cultural and intellectual revival of the Jewish people, which he deemed an essential prerequisite for Jewish resettlement in the Land of Israel. But contrary to his image as a detached man of letters, Ahad Ha'am was also deeply concerned with the nuts and bolts of the Zionist project.

{ By **ORR SCHARF**

Born in 1856 to a Hasidic family in the Ukraine, Ginzberg was a Talmudic prodigy who left Orthodoxy, steeped himself in Western culture and became a highly influential figure in the pre-Herzlian Zionist movement. As the son of a well-to-do merchant, Ginzberg enjoyed economic security for a good part of his life. After the collapse of the family business, he worked as a manager for the Jewish-owned Wissotzky Tea company, for whom he relocated from Odessa to London in 1907. Only in his mid-sixties did Ahad Ha'am consummate his Zionist involvement, moving to Tel Aviv in 1922. His funeral five years later was attended by thousands.

Ginzberg was a prominent member of the *Hovevei Zion* (Lovers of Zion) group, which constituted the first organized attempt by modern Jews to act on their national aspirations. Officially launched in 1884 at a convention in the Prussian city of Katowice (today in Poland), *Hovevei Zion* engaged in fundraising, land acquisition and recruitment of prospective settlers willing to relocate to Ottoman-occupied Palestine. Alongside his administrative role at *Hovevei Zion*, Ginzberg earned his public reputation mostly as a controversial and outspoken polemicist, publisher and thinker, writing under the pen name Ahad Ha'am ("One of the People"). For many years, he was a shining star of the unique constellation of Jewish intellectuals who came to live in Odessa – a group that included the poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik and the historian Shimon Dubnow.

Ahad Ha'am dedicated his writing and much of his public activity to the revival of the Hebrew language. As founder and leader of the elitist, secretive Zionist faction, *B'nei Moshe*, he required that its members learn to speak and write in Hebrew. He was editor and publisher of several Hebrew-language journals and established both boys' and girls' schools in Eastern Europe and Palestine.

Spiritual Zionism, in practical terms, meant that the Land of Israel needed to become a center of Jewish renewal before it

could house a viable Jewish polity. For Ahad Ha'am this solution was a realistic middle road between the ossified Judaism of Eastern Europe and the urgent political agenda of the charismatic Theodore Herzl, who published his proposal of a Jewish state in 1896 and a year later convened the first Zionist Congress in Basel. But as Herzl's popularity rose among European Jewry, Ahad Ha'am's declined.

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In 1902, Herzl published his utopian novel *Altneuland* (*Old-New Land*), which marked the author's most extensive display of his political vision. In the novel, the Jewish state is already in existence a mere two decades into the future, in 1923. Modeled after Herzl's Viennese image of a liberal, German-speaking state, the Old-New Land is prosperous and pluralistic, peaceful and exuberant. The novel rekindled Ahad Ha'am's chagrin at Herzl, which burst onto the pages of *HaShiloah*, the Hebrew monthly Ginzberg had founded in 1897. In a vituperative review, Ahad Ha'am tore Herzl's vision to shreds, deriding it as "aping Euro-Christian culture." He condemned as reckless the author's setting of the story so soon into the future, thus stirring false hopes of imminent redemption among his readers. Ahad Ha'am concluded his diatribe by recommending a reference to another Zionist-utopian novel, *A Journey to the Land of Israel in the Year 2040*, published



Ahad Ha'am
(Asher Zvi Ginzberg)

in Hebrew ten years earlier by one Elhanan Levinsky. That novel presented a vision that Ahad Ha'am found praiseworthy and agreeable: a Jewish state with a Hebrew culture, offering "a superior Zionist ideal of the Hebraic author over the German leader" – in other words, Herzl.

As it happened, that same superior "Hebraic" Levinsky, a friend of Ahad Ha'am's and a member of *B'nei Moshe*, had a dozen years earlier accused *Hovevei Zion* of utopianism and detachment from reality. Published in October 1890 in the Hebrew newspaper *Hamelitz*, Levinsky's essay "Eternal Life and

Temporal Life" (*Hayei Olam ve'Hayei Sha'ah*) triggered a raucous quarrel of the quills. "The People of Israel need bread, they are hungry, thirsty, bare and tired," Levinsky wrote, "and the Lovers of Zion [*Hovevei Zion*] tell them that in the future pastries to feed on and garments to wear will grow out of the soil of the Land of Israel – give us bread!" With bitter irony, Levinsky mocked the idea that "the select few among us who care for the greater good are. . . *Hovevei Zion*. Not the lovers of the nation at large, only the lovers of Zion." *Hovevei Zion* may talk loftily about the need to change the course of history, he claimed, but "those who have lost their livelihood under the new [Czarist anti-Semitic] laws and whose children and infants are left without bread will not be consoled with history."

In a vituperative review of *Altneuland*, Ahad Ha'am derided Herzl's utopian vision as "aping Euro-Christian culture."

As the polemic widened in the Hebrew press, Ahad Ha'am felt obligated to defend the position of *Hovevei Zion*. His rejoinder, aptly titled "Confusion of Opinions" (*Bilbul HaDe'ot*) appeared eight months later in *Hamelitz*, in July 1891. By that time Ahad Ha'am was embroiled in his first major political setback, following the publication earlier that year of his essay "Truth from the Land of Israel" (*Emet Me'Eretz Yisrael*.)*

As member of the steering committee of *Hovevei Zion*, Ahad Ha'am had recently journeyed to Palestine to monitor firsthand the movement's projects across the country. He

* All quotes from *Emet Me'Eretz Yisrael* are from Alan Dowty's translation, published as "Much Ado about Little: Ahad Ha'am's 'Truth from Eretz Israel,' Zionism and the Arabs," in *Israel Studies*, Fall 2000.

was dismayed but not surprised to find that his concern over the premature enthusiasm and deficient implementation of the settlement of the Land of Israel was well-founded. He began his essay with the disclaimer that the Land's "vitality has not waned" and that it now "has the capacity to give life and happiness to great numbers of its children." However (he immediately continued), "I want to reveal here a small part [of life in Palestine] – the ugliest part." Among his chief disappointments were the profiteering that plagued the acquisition of lands and the Jewish colonies' total financial dependence on Jewish philanthropists. Other faults included the predominant reliance on the winemaking industry, which he deemed inefficient and morally problematic, and the patronizing approach to the indigenous Arab population, against which he sternly cautioned. "From abroad we are accustomed to believing that the Arabs are all desert savages, like donkeys," Ahad Ha'am wrote. "But this is a big mistake. The Arab, like all children of Shem, has a sharp intellect and is very cunning."

As a spiritual Zionist, Ahad Ha'am was accustomed to accusations of daydreaming, but now he had to face the ire of his own allies over his morose and acerbic criticism of Jewish pioneering in Palestine. Levinsky had written a disgruntled response to the "Truth" essay, and so had Menachem Ussishkin, a disciple of Ahad Ha'am who had been a traveling companion in Palestine and thus felt competent to counter his mentor's claims of the financial ineptitude and shaky prospects of the settlements.

Ahad Ha'am's "Confusion of Opinions" is excerpted here in English translation for the first time. Convinced that "Truth from the Land of Israel" had been grossly misread, Ahad Ha'am simply asserted that "Truth will remain true," and constructed his new essay as a reply to "one of our finest writers," namely Elhanan Levinsky, author of "Eternal Life and Temporal Life."

One of the chief misapprehensions, in Ahad Ha'am's eyes, was the accusation that he

was insensitive to the daily hardships faced by the settlers. His opponents argued that his "spiritual" concerns for the Jewish people as a whole had blinded him to the personal plight of Jews struggling to make ends meet, both in Palestine and elsewhere. His expectation that settlers in the Land of Israel should carry the burden of national responsibility, while the mundane question "what shall we eat" loomed above their heads, attested – it was charged – to his detachment and impracticality.

In "Confusion of Opinions," Ahad Ha'am employs Levinsky's question "what shall we eat" as a rhetorical device to evince his sensitivity to the settlers' daily reality. He is at pains to show that he was not placing inhumane and unrealistic demands on the settlers. On the contrary, he believed that the well-being of the settlers of the Land of Israel should be the concern of the entire nation, while "the misfortunes of the individual" of Diaspora Jews were a private matter, or the concern of their local community at best.

More than a century has passed since the tempestuous struggles over the nature of the fledgling Zionist movement. Although the settlement efforts of *Hovevei Zion* has been duly inscribed in official Israeli memory as the epitome of Zionist pioneering, the names of its leaders, activists and thinkers collect soot and dust on street signs and plaques. The polemics of Ahad Ha'am and his contemporaries have largely been forgotten, but reading them today, one finds that time has not blunted their edge. If anything, the establishment of the State of Israel has only sharpened some of the dilemmas they raise.

In the 21st century, passionate Zionist polemics find colorful expression on the Knesset floor and on boisterous Hebrew talk shows. The manifold structures of Israel-Diaspora relations recycle and refine the discourse of vision and philanthropy debated by Ahad Ha'am and his critics. And it's still not clear, after all these years, how to differentiate reliably between daydreamers and realists, opinion-makers and genuine leaders.



Confusion of Opinions

Eight months ago, when one of our finest writers publicly mourned that at such dour times, as our woes increase and the state of our brethren is dire, *Hovevei Zion* are focusing all their efforts “within the narrow con-

fines of the soil of the Land of Israel” and to all questions they retort: Love Zion!, while failing to notice that “only one percent of a hundred of the host of the House of Israel leave to settle in the Land of Israel while 99 percent remain here.” I said [in “Truth from the Land of Israel”] that the author erred by confusing two notions: that of the *nation* of Israel and that of the *people* of Israel; the



needs of the whole nation that are indeed shared by all of its members and the needs of the whole nation that are the needs of many private individuals, each unto himself. Had he [i.e. Levinsky] distinguished between these notions adequately, he would have understood that *Hovevei Zion*, whose overall goal is only to promote the greater good, consists of private individuals when it comes to filling

their personal needs, like all other individual members of the public. For this one percent out of the hundred is what we seek, considering it to be the answer to the question of the whole nation's existence, setting aside the 99 percent of the masses of the House of Israel, that is, a host of many individuals, who will remain here [in the Diaspora]. The circumference of the circle consists of a great many dots, but only the one dot at its center is the soul that enlivens all the others. We lament the misfortune of thousands of Jews who are losing their war for personal survival; but to them we say: Do not love Zion, because the love of Zion has nothing to do with the misfortunes of the individual. Only to those who love their people wholeheartedly and seek answer to the question of its existence *at large* – to them we say: Love Zion . . .

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If we all see the settlement of the Land of Israel as the answer to “the question of the existence of the whole nation,” we must all confess that there is a vast difference between departure for the Land of Israel and departure for all other countries. When an Israelite leaves to earn his bread in another land, he does so “at his own peril.” If he finds there that which he sought – good for him. And if not, then one more person has joined the paupers of that country, becoming a burden upon its people or the Jews resident there, without becoming a liability for the Jewish people as a whole. The same applies if he behaves improperly there, employs despi-



Soup kitchen, Jerusalem, ca. 1915

cable means to earn his living, etc.; he is sinning against that country and the Jews who live there, who may have to pay the price for his transgressions. But to the Jewish people *as a whole* he has done nothing, and it's all the same to us if the pauper or criminal lives in the north or south, or if he is supported by his brethren in this country or that one. Therefore, the whole nation is not obligated to prevent anyone from putting himself at risk and going wherever his mood carries him, to seek happiness or wealth and fulfill his heart's desire. This does not apply in the Land of Israel. There we find that "the one percent of a hundred" is not a self-sufficient being, but one stone, large or small, in the foundation of an entire building, which will have consequences for the existence of the entire nation, its ultimate happiness and dignity. And since the entire future of this building depends upon the nature and form of its foundation, and each and every of its stones affects the good of the entire people, the whole nation must take care that the materials are solid and that the plan is adequate and corresponds with the greater purpose of the building . . .

This is what I meant in my essay ["Truth from the Land of Israel"], when I said that the "settlement of the Land of Israel is not an answer to the question 'What shall we eat?' for each and every individual, but rather to the question of the life of the whole nation," and only a naïve or disingenuous person might interpret these simple words as though I meant that each and every individual who arrives in the Land of Israel must concern himself with nothing but the greater good of the whole nation and is barred from thinking whatsoever about "What shall we eat!" It is not the lumber and stones that concern themselves with the future of the building, but the *builders* who do their best to choose good and sturdy materials, to lay each component in its right place, in which case the building will naturally be strong and beautiful. Thus it was not from the settlers that I demanded that they go settle

solely for the nation's greater good, but I demanded from the leaders that they establish a system that would attract the worthy and repel the unworthy (distinguishing worthy from unworthy by the degree of physical and moral stamina and their love of labor and peace and austerity). From the writers and preachers I demanded that they understand what they are doing and not collect useless building materials by fabricating good news and making shoddy proposals. From the men of action, who take part in the construction, I demanded that they not aggrandize themselves and not ruin the whole building by acting rashly on their own; and I certainly did not address my words to the unfortunate masses who seek an answer to the question of bread – they are rushing to flee, driven by hunger, and it is foolish to believe that *words* have the power to stop them – but rather to the nation and its leaders, its writers and thinkers wherever they may be, who steer these people toward the Land of Israel and try to amass a great pile of stones, not discriminating whole from broken, without order and unity and without a well-defined vision. . .

But it is not my main goal here to show my critics that they have misread the words they are responding to; it is another, more surprising and saddening matter that I wish to address. As I said above, that from all the words of my detractors, from the long-winded complaints about "the trials and tribulations" they invoke in order to prove to me that this is not the right time to indulge in "philosophy" – I can see that the movement of *Hovevei Zion* grows increasingly absorbed in the question of emigration [for the Land of Israel], not only in deeds, but also in *thoughts*. For *Hovevei Zion* are soon to turn into ordinary philanthropists, who seek nothing but a palliative remedy for the illness of the hour, without any concern for tomorrow. . . Our bad experiences have hardened the hearts and confused the minds, for we tend to forget about the whole because of the details, forget the "eternal life" due to our "temporal life," and soon enough

we will stop “philosophizing,” that is, stop seeing the movement of *hibbat Zion* [“the love of Zion,”] as “a complete and lasting answer to the Jewish question,” and we will become one more “association” among the other righteous associations whose sole purpose is to bring a portion of the paupers of our people to a place that is safe, *at the current moment*, only that we give priority in this matter to the Land of Israel, because there we have a beautiful “past,” precious tombs. . .

However, if this is indeed so, then the question that was asked eight months ago resurfaces: if *hibbat Zion* is also but a partial answer to the greater question of emigration, how can we justify making it the foremost question, the watchword of national Judaism, if only one in a hundred goes to settle in the Land of Israel? And if our *current* woes are sufficient reason for us to rid our minds of concern about the days to come, and disturb our *careful and lucid* work toward a greater cause in the distant future, then – I keep asking – can we justifiably complain about our ancestors for failing, during the long years of exile, to lay in the Land of Israel the cornerstone for the happiness of posterity? Were their woes truly smaller than our own? And yet, we often hear such disdain from *Hovevei Zion*.

Regrettably, it seems that if I said in my essay there is “no system and no order and no unity in our actions,” – I only said *half* of it, and to complete the picture, we must further add, that there is no system and no order and no unity in our *opinions* as well, and wherever we turn we see only confusion – the confusion of actions and the confusion of opinions.

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Orr Scharf is an associate editor of Havruta. His Hebrew translation of Yochanan Muffs' *The Personhood of God* was published by SHI in 2008. Orr holds an M.A. in philosophy from the University of Haifa.