

Against the Tide: **REFORM LEADERSHIP** *and the* **ZIONIST IDEAL**

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Reform Judaism's stance on Zionism has evolved dramatically in the last century. Although today the Movement is united in vigorous support of Israel, this wasn't always the case. In the pre-World War II years, the leadership by and large did not approve of the nationalist movement, which was seen to negate the German Reform ideals of equal rights and separation of religion and state. The ethic of a return from exile that impassioned early Zionists was alien to the large majority of Reform intellectuals, whose 1885 Pittsburgh Platform explicitly rejected the Zionist ideal. They believed in being citizens of the nations of the world and did not identify with an ancient homeland.

Several members of the Hebrew Union College community swam against the prevailing tide long before the Holocaust illuminated the need for a Jewish State. These pioneers were proud to be Zionists and dreamed of an Israel that embodied their Reform values. Their tireless efforts helped build the infrastructure of the Israeli dream.



Dr. Judah L. Magnes, C 1900, was ordained at HUC/Cincinnati in the first class of the 20th century. Magnes is remembered as the leader of New York's progressive Jewish community. He helped found the American Jewish Committee in 1906, and served as president of the Kehillah of New York City throughout its lifespan from 1908 to 1922. In addition to having been a champion of human rights, education, and liberal

values, and the spokesman for liberal tradition in North America, he was also an ardent Zionist, and came to be recognized as the Reform Zionist leader of his generation.

Magnes discovered Zionism after traveling in the Jewish towns of Galician and Russian Poland during his Ph.D. years. He returned to America a confirmed Zionist, and preached that rekindling Jewish life in Palestine would enrich life in the Diaspora rather than undermine it. Although his beliefs were highly unusual at the time, he expressed them publicly and took leadership roles that would help spread the movement. From 1905 to 1908 he served as Secretary of the Federation of American Zionists, now the Zionist Organization of America.

Magnes argued vehemently against the prevailing Reform belief that Judaism should be considered a religion and not a nation. Michael Langer's anthology, *A Reform Zionist Perspective; Judaism and Community in the Modern Age*, records Magnes's address to the Council of Jewish Women, in which he admonished Jews who reject Zionism on the basis of its emphasis on Jewish "peoplehood": *I am inclined at times to think that many Jews have not even today found the Jewish people. And yet, the discovery of this people breaks in upon you with wondrous freshness and surprise. To turn aside from the quibbles as to whether or not there is a Jewish people, and to come nearer to the beating heart of this people... to partake of its joys, its sorrows, its hopes, to delight in its keen mind and sharp wit, to fight its fights, to love its traditions and aspirations... to join in prayer to the God of your Fathers – that means to live Judaism.*

Magnes always yearned for the ancient Jewish homeland, and when the British opened the gates to Palestine after World War I, he immigrated in 1922 to take part in the Zionist project. He helped build the Hebrew University, becoming its first Chancellor and later President. The University became the incubator for Magnes's most strident goals – high-level education and reconciliation with the land's Arab inhabitants. He viewed the Hebrew University as a bridge between eastern and western traditions, and a meeting ground for peace and dialogue. An ardent pacifist, for 25 years during the pre-state period he lobbied for creating a bi-national state that would grant equal rights to all of

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its citizens, both Jewish and Arab. He helped found the coexistence group Berit Shalom in 1925 to further this goal, and just a month prior to the establishment of the state and shortly before his death, he traveled to the U.S. as a delegate of the Ihud (Union) Association of Palestine to advocate for his bi-national dream. Magnes died in 1948, just five months after the State of Israel declared its independence.



The same year that Magnes immigrated to Palestine, **Rabbi Stephen Samuel Wise** founded the Jewish Institute of Religion. Trained at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Wise became an influential leader of the Reform Movement and was instrumental in engineering the political developments that led to Israel's independence.

Wise threw off the cloak of apathy for Zionism long before most other Reform leaders came around to the cause. He served as a member of the International Zionist Executive Committee and was a delegate at the Second Zionist Congress in Basel in 1898. He was also named Honorary Secretary of the Zionist Organization of America.

When the American Jewish Congress convened for the first time in 1918, Wise was elected as a delegate along with other future luminaries, including Justice Louis Brandeis, Judge Felix Frankfurter, and Golda Meier Meyerson. The Congress's website today honors Wise, saying that he "set forth principles that were unique for the time and that continue to guide us today: that Jews are entitled not merely to charity, but to justice, and that there exist fundamental rights to which Jews and men and women of all faiths are entitled."

In 1925, Rabbi Wise became Chairperson of Keren Hayesod, United Israel Appeal, increasing his efforts to change the Reform Movement's official stance on Zionism. As Hitler came to power, he lobbied for Americans to protest the fascist leader, and helped create the World Jewish Congress to campaign against the Nazi regime. As the war progressed, he was elected to co-chair the American Zionist Emergency Council in the hope of rescuing as many Jews as possible.

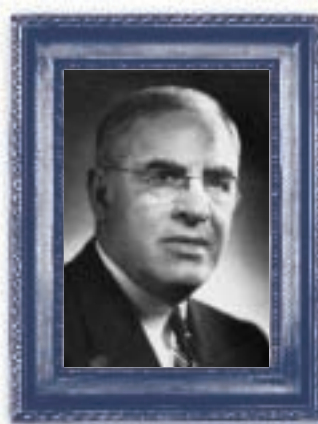
Wise had the ear of two U.S. presidents whose decisions dramatically influenced Israel's fate. In 1917, as Chairperson of the Provisional Executive Committee for General Zionist Affairs, he persuaded President Woodrow Wilson to support the Balfour Declaration – the letter from the British Foreign Secretary to Lord Rothschild that was the



Dr. Stephen S. Wise speaks at the hunger banquet at the second annual convention of the Labor Zionist Committee for Relief and Rehabilitation, November 7, 1948, at the Pennsylvania Hotel.

first political recognition of Zionist aims by a great power and provided the basis for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. Wise was also a close confidant of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whom he advised on issues pertaining to Zionism and the Jewish community in America.

Wise was a passionate advocate of Herzl's legacy, preaching to his congregants at Congregation Beth Israel in Portland, Oregon in 1905: *It is of the essence of [Herzl's] immortal service to the race to have by inspired work and high example made out of a mournful and tragic necessity a glorious and inspiring ideal. The Jewish consciousness re-awakened, Jewish unity re-asserted, Jewish self-respect restored, Jewish solidarity re-forged -- these together constitute the Jewish renaissance.*



Despite this strong leadership, the Reform Movement's official stance on Zionism remained unchanged until 1937, when **Rabbi Felix Levy**, C '1907, as President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), helped overturn the anti-Zionist sentiments codified in the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885. Levy fought hard to pass a controversial new document, the "Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism," known as the Columbus Platform.

The document's ratification represented a shift in consciousness for American Reform Jews. As Hitler's campaign threatened European Jewry, people began to realize that Israel wasn't an abstract concept to embrace or reject, but a necessity for Jewish survival. The Columbus Platform, written by HUC faculty member **Rabbi Samuel S. Cohon**, endorsed the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine and "affirm[ed] the obligation of all Jewry to aid in its upbuilding as a Jewish homeland by endeavoring to make it not only a haven of refuge for



the oppressed but also a center of Jewish culture and spiritual life.” The document also reintroduced the idea of chosenness into the Reform lexicon, a sharp ideological departure for the Movement.

Levy expressed his pro-Zionist ideas early on in his career. He explained his concept of the chosen people in a speech to the Society for the Advancement of Judaism in 1928, saying that “if

by [chosenness] we mean that Israel should consciously set itself up as a people that is to function as priests of the ideal, if we mean that in a world constituted like that of today, materialist, deterministic, and mechanistic, some group should stand for the idea of the world, not as it is, but as it might be.”

Levy passed his vision on to another generation of progressive Zionists, his grandchildren, Rabbi Naamah Kelman, Associate Dean of HUC-JIR’s Jerusalem campus, and Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman, founder and spiritual leader of Jerusalem’s Progressive congregation Kol HaNeshama. Through their professions and lives in Israel, they both work to concretize their grandfather’s dream.



Activist **Rabbi Herbert A. Friedman**, N ’44, who passed away at the age of 89 on March 31, 2008, was an architect of clandestine rescue missions that gave thousands of Holocaust survivors a home in pre-state Palestine, during the wave of immigration historically known as *Aliyah Bet*—the second *aliyah*. He became a U.S. Army chaplain in Germany after his ordination at HUC and was appointed Assistant Adviser

on Jewish Affairs to the Commander of the U.S. Occupation Forces. He responded viscerally to the inhuman neglect of the homeless survivors after the war, made to wait in displaced persons camps, some of which were the same Nazi prisons and concentration camps from which the survivors had been liberated. Incensed that the British refused them entry into Palestine, he commandeered U.S. army trucks to ferry them to Italian ports and onto ships (including the S.S. Exodus) that would attempt to outrun the British blockade.

In his preface to his 2000 autobiography, *Roots of the Future*, Friedman explains that these rescue missions and his later work smuggling arms to the *Haganah*—the underground military organization of the *yishuv* (Jewish community) in Eretz-Israel from 1920 to 1948—and bringing medieval religious documents out of Germany were simply an extension of the heroism that he saw at home. Just prior to the war, his mother took in three German Jewish children who fled the Nazis,

even though the family of five already lived in a tiny two-bedroom apartment and subsisted on rations because they had lost their home during the Depression. For Friedman’s family, the chance to save three Jewish lives outweighed the demands of poverty. He developed from this example a value system that guided his life of activism:

We are what we believe, and for as long as I can remember, my fundamental beliefs have been these: the primary sacredness of Jewish survival, both for the Jews as a people and for humanity at large; the value of every single Jewish life, especially now, in the aftermath of Hitler’s genocidal attack; the inestimable value of Israel as a physical and spiritual center; the responsibility of every Jew for every other and for the homeland.

Rabbi Friedman became a patriarch of organized Jewish life in America, holding the post of Executive Chairman of the United Jewish Appeal for more than two decades in the 1960s and 1970s. He conceived of the “missions” to Israel that became the ubiquitous core of American Jewry’s support of the State. He created the organization’s National Young Leadership Cabinet, whose first conference took place in 1960, led the Israel Education Fund, and was Co-founder and President of the Wexner Heritage Foundation.



Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, C 1915, was a visionary orator and relentless advocate for the Zionist cause in the mid-twentieth century. He captured the world’s attention in 1947 as the rabbi who addressed the Assembly of the United Nations on behalf of the Zionists, just months before the U.N. announced its approval of the partition plan and the establishment of the State of Israel.

Lithuanian-born and New York-raised, Silver spent most of his career as the rabbi of Cleveland’s Congregation Tifereth Israel, a post that became the backdrop for his outstanding work in the leadership of organized Jewish life in America. He was Founder and Co-Chair of the United Jewish Appeal, President of the United Palestine Appeal, Chairman of the Jewish Agency, representative of the American

Abba Hillel Silver addressing a meeting of Zionists, pre-1948.



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Zionist movement at Zionist Congresses, and simultaneously President of both the Zionist Organization of America and the Central Conference of American Rabbis from 1945 to 1947.

Silver led these organizations with his vocal chords, rallying his American audiences – both Jewish and non-Jewish – through inspiring speeches in support of the creation of the State of Israel. While most Zionist leaders at the time were against pushing the U.S. government to action during wartime, Silver believed that America must intervene in Palestine. His public outspokenness shaped world opinion, and taught Americans that they held great power in the public sphere.

In his Founder's Day address at HUC in 1950, Silver spoke jubilantly about his hopes for the new State:

The restoration of the State of Israel, with its tremendous psychological implications, has freed our people from the spirit of depression and forlornness, the fears and the confusions of the long, weary, and homeless centuries. It is now possible, if so we will, to move forward on our appointed tasks as a covenanted people with a new heart and a new song.



Dr. Harry M. Orlinsky was Professor of Bible at HUC-JIR/NY and one of the leading Biblical scholars of his generation. He was known for his translation of Rashi's commentary on the Pentateuch and as Editor-in-Chief of the Jewish Publication Society's 1962 translation of the Pentateuch. Ancillary to his academic work, he played a vital role in one of the lesser-known but fascinating dramas of Israeli history, the

top-secret acquisition of the last four Dead Sea Scrolls. The first three scrolls had been purchased from Jordan by Professor Eliezer Lippe Sukenik, founder and head of Hebrew University's Department of Archaeology, coincidentally on the eve of the U.N. resolution on the Jewish State in November 1947. Sukenik intended to acquire the others when they reached the antiquities market, but when the War of Independence began, the Jordanian owners whisked the remaining four scrolls away to the United States to prevent them from ever falling into Israeli hands. Israeli scholars thought they would never see the scrolls again, until seven years later, when a nondescript advertisement under "miscellaneous for sale" appeared in the Wall Street Journal.

In his book *Essays in Biblical Culture and Bible Translation*, Orlinsky recounts the day in July 1954 when his departure for a family vacation was disrupted by a phone call concerning this astonishing advertisement.

Sukenik's son, Yigael Yadin, was calling from the office of the Consul-General of Israel in New York City, requesting his immediate presence for a classified mission. Orlinsky's task was to meet the merchant selling the scrolls in a hotel room at the Waldorf Astoria, examine the texts to ensure their authenticity, and buy them for the Israelis. His whole adventure would take place under the pseudonym "Mr. Green." Orlinsky knew the scrolls intimately because he had used a reproduction for his research on the *Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament*. When he entered the room he was allowed to examine the merchandise by hand, including the 22-foot-long Isaiah Scroll, carbon dated to approximately 335 B.C.E. - 107 B.C.E. Sure that they had found the real thing, he called the Consulate to report success, using the agreed-upon code word – "le-hayim!"



Rabbi Stephen A. Schafer, C '55, fought for the State of Israel quite literally. In 1948, while a student at the University of Delaware, he responded to a call for volunteer soldiers to join in defending the new State against the attacking Arab nations. He was only twenty at the time, but he was already a veteran of World War II, and together with the other 3,500 volunteers who enlisted from 43 different countries, he contributed

crucial military skills that bolstered the *Haganah*, by then the nascent Israel Defense Forces. The special unit that was created for the volunteers, called *Mahal*, still exists today for Jews from abroad who come to Israel to serve in the Army.

Schafer's wife Nina explains that her husband's dedication to the emerging State was a byproduct of what he witnessed during World War II. Even when the rabbi of his home congregation advised him against fighting in Palestine, he knew that there must be a place for the Jewish people, and was willing to risk his life to secure it. When the war was over, he remained in Jerusalem for a few years, paying his way through courses at Hebrew University by making post-war repairs in his neighborhood. He fixed blown-out windows and repaired bullet-riddled walls, all so he could learn Hebrew and study philosophy with Martin Buber. The entire experience had a profound impact on Schafer, and he decided to return to America to enroll in rabbinical school at HUC-JIR.

Schafer's rabbinate has always echoed the ideals of freedom and human rights for which he fought as part of the Israeli Army. An activist by nature, he led his community to march for civil rights with Martin Luther King, Jr. supported fellow *Mahal* pilot Abie Nathan's humanitarian efforts in Israel and around the world, and built homes for the homeless long before Habitat for Humanity ever existed.

His first love as a rabbi was experiential Jewish education, and as the founding head of the URJ's Youth Department, he created an integrated Zionist youth program that is the basis of today's camps, NFTY, and Israel programming. He organized opportunities for

young people to live on a *kibbutz*, and helped to create ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America, to encourage *aliyah* as the point man in America for the founding of Yahel and Lotan, the first Reform *kibbutzim*. Nina remembers joining her husband to collect petitions for ARZA in the 1970's. She remembers his vigor for grassroots activism, and unflagging and contagious passion for Israel.



Dr. Ezra Spicandler, C '51, founding Dean of HUC-JIR/ Jerusalem and Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of Hebrew Literature at HUC-JIR/Cincinnati, also fought in Israel's War of Independence. In November 1947 he and his wife Shirley traveled on a rickety Greek ship from Marseilles to Haifa, where he had resided as a child in 1929-30. Ten days into his studies at Hebrew University for a doctorate in Talmudic history, with

a graduate fellowship from HUC, he was recruited to join the ranks of the Haganah (see page 29).



Rabbi Richard Hirsch, C '51, is known as "the architect" of the international Movement for Progressive Judaism (IMPJ). Under his 26-year stewardship, the Movement ballooned to include nearly 40 countries and gained a strong foothold in Israel. Inspired by the trauma and victory of the Six Day War, he advocated for Reform Jews around the world to embrace Zionism, saying "The State of Israel is central to Jewish existence." He

moved the World Union for Progressive Judaism's (WUPJ) headquarters from New York to Jerusalem when he assumed leadership in 1973, and made alliances with the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Hirsch explains why he pushed for transfer of the headquarters to Israel: "The State of Israel had become the center stage in the Jewish drama, where the character of Jewish life would be shaped and the destiny of the Jewish people determined. If we as a Movement continued in the path of restricting our role to spectators, we would be marginalized and tangential. It was not enough for Reform Jews as *individuals* to be active Zionists. The Movement as a collective had to exert the full force of its major institutions on the new central stage of Jewish life."

His proposals for building a Progressive religious movement in Israel included synagogue-community centers, kindergartens, schools, *kibbutzim*, cultural programs, and training indigenous rabbis and professional and lay leadership to develop the Movement. His plans also called for the construction of facilities throughout the country and the

development of a world education center for Progressive Judaism on the HUC-JIR campus in Jerusalem. He says, "The decision to transfer the international headquarters to Jerusalem and to build a substantial Movement in Israel represents the most historic action taken by Reform Judaism in the 20th century. In so doing we catapulted our Movement to play an integral constructive role in restoring Jewish peoplehood, reviving Jewish civilization, and perpetuating Jewish heritage."

Before making *aliyah* in 1973, Hirsch led several Chicago and Colorado congregations, was director of the Chicago Federation and the Great Lakes Council for the URJ, and served for ten years as Founding Director of the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center in Washington, D.C.

He and his wife Bella were actively involved in the struggle for Soviet Jewry, and in the late 1980s worked to create a Progressive presence, establishing the first liberal congregation in Moscow in 1990. Hirsch says, "I consider the reawakening of Soviet Jewry to be one of the miraculous ramifications of the Zionist revolution. The victory of the Six Day War propelled Soviet Jewry to revive their Jewish national consciousness. The development of a growing liberal movement in the FSU corroborates our recognition that in order to perpetuate Jewish identity it is essential to blend Judaism as a faith and culture with Jewish ethnicity."

Named Honorary Life President of the WUPJ at his official retirement in 1999, Hirsch continues to lead on the international scene, as Co-Chairman of the Jewish Agency for Israel's Commission on Eastern Europe and as a member of the Executive Boards of the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization.

He summarizes the Movement's trajectory as a pairing of ambition and responsibility: "In establishing the Religious Action Center in Washington, Reform Judaism became a full and equal partner in aspiring to fulfill the American dream. In moving Reform Judaism to Israel, we became a full and equal partner in aspiring to fulfill the Jewish dream. In the process, as a Movement, we discovered that full partners cannot be silent partners. We also learned that equal partners not only have the right to demand equal rights; they also have the duty to assume equal responsibility." With this imperative Hirsch helped build institutions that today's Israeli Progressive Rabbis and community leaders continue to nurture, contributing to the Jewish State's vibrant future. ■



Rabbi Richard Hirsch at the dedication of the Reform Movement's Kibbutz Yahel, 1976.