

Strange Orthodoxies and Quantum Secularities

Very Important Point *

most Orthodox Jews opposed the creation of Israel

Israel was created by a movement of non-believing Jews. When the UN voted to partition Palestine on 29 November 1947, much of the world's orthodox community opposed the move. One of the most powerful groups, Agudat Israel, actually appealed to the UN General Assembly to vote against the motion. For centuries, orthodox Judaism had held that an 'ingathering of the exiles' in biblical Israel would be heresy before the Messiah's return. One of Agudat Israel's leader, Jakob de Haan, was assassinated by the Hagana in Palestine in 1924 after making the same argument there.

However, within months of Israel's establishment, Agudat Israel's opposition to Zionism folded. In retrospect the turning point was a letter sent to the organisation by the executive committee of the Jewish Agency on 19 June 1947. In it, David Ben Gurion and others outlined what was to become known as the 'status quo' agreement, a historic compromise between religious Judaism and political Zionism. It proposed that in the new state the Sabbath be made a legal day of rest, kosher food be guaranteed in all state kitchens, the rabbinical courts be granted effective jurisdiction over marriages and full autonomy be guaranteed to religious schools.¹ The compromise

Such a compromise was needed because, from a religious standpoint, Zionism was irredeemably assimilationist. In 1893, the movement's founding father, Theodore Herzl, even proposed a mass conversion to Christianity:

I wanted to solve the Jewish question, at least in Austria, with the help of the Catholic church. I wished to arrange for an audience with the Pope and say to him: Help us against the anti-Semites and I will lead a great movement for the free and honourable conversion of Jews to Christianity. 'Free and honourable' inasmuch as the leaders of this movement – myself in particular – would remain Jews and as Jews urge a conversion to the majority faith. In broad daylight, at twelve o'clock on a Sunday, the exchange of faith would take place in St Stephens Cathedral with a solemn parade and the peal of bells.²

a must add Hertzl Quote

1. E. Marmorstein, *Heaven at Bay* (OUP, 1969), pp. 86–7.

2. Orr, *Israel*, p. 16.

Such betrayals of faith alienated secular Jewish leftists as much as the religious. After the Kishinev pogrom in 1903, Herzl had gone to Russia to try to negotiate a deal with Vyacheslav Von Plehve, the Russian interior minister, and instigator of the pogrom. Herzl boasted afterwards, 'I have an absolutely binding promise from him that he will procure a charter for Palestine for us in 15 years at the outside. There is one condition, however: the revolutionaries must stop their struggle against the Russian government.'³ The revolutionaries in question, the Bund, who had organised Jewish communities to defend themselves against the pogrom, denounced the Zionist strategy afresh. Vladimir Medam, for instance, wrote: The bund → anti-Zionists

[The Zionists] speak of a national home in Eretz Israel, but our organization opposes this thinking absolutely. We believe our home is here, in Poland, in Russia, Lithuania, Ukraine, and the United States. Here we live, here we struggle, here we build, here we hope for a better future. We do not live here as aliens. Here we are at home! It is on this principle that our survival depends.⁴

The Holocaust changed the terms of the debate but not so much that Israel appeared a desirable residence for a Diaspora establishment scared of charges of dual loyalty. When David Ben Gurion instructed a meeting of American Jews in 1950 on the need for more *halutzim* [pioneers] from the US, Jacob Blaustein, the president of the American Jewish Committee, angrily retorted: 'American Jews vigorously repudiate any suggestion or implication that they are in exile... To American Jews, America is home!'⁵ To American Jews, America is home!!

Only the blessing of the religious institutions could endow the Zionist project with the legitimacy it needed. Failing that, Israel would have struggled to attract immigrants, to attain international credibility as a self-proclaimed 'Jewish state' and provide an underpinning for its citizens' self-definition and the state's own *raison d'être*. However, the price exacted by the Rabbinate was a heavy one, and it continues to be felt across a largely secular society, which would most likely reject large swathes of the status quo agreement, were it ever to be put to a referendum. After 1967, religious Zionism became a powerful political phenomenon in its own right as Messianism melded a faith-based Jewish identity to secular Zionist security-consciousness. The trend is discussed further in Chapter 9.

67 was a turning point for religious Zionism *

Jewish Bund in Russia

3. Henry J. Tobias, *The Jewish Bund in Russia* (Stanford, 1972), p. 248.

4. Vladimir Medam, *Neyer Felt*, 2 July 1920, p. 12.

5. Erik Shachter and Amotz Asa-El, 'The Anglo difference – contributions of English speaking Jews to Israel', *Jerusalem Post*, 2 October 2003.