

# Messianism and Zionism: Two Radically Different Approaches toward Creating a Jewish State in Palestine

By Rabbi Jonathan Brown



Rabbi Jonathan Brown

Rabbi Brown, who is currently serving on the editorial board of *The Torch*, joined the Winchester Torch Club in 2005 and has presented papers on his uncle, Dr. Nelson Glueck, Biblical archaeologist and President of the Reform Jewish Seminary in Cincinnati, and on the impact on Leon Czolgosz, who assassinated President McKinley, of Emma Goldman, who “inspired him” to shoot the president. Both papers were published in *The Torch*.

An ordained Reform rabbi, Rabbi Brown has served congregations in many parts of the country and done interfaith work in all of his postings, including Long Beach, California, where he was involved in the effort to provide support for AIDS sufferers and raise funds for the several AIDS hospices there. He is also a published author.

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On November 29, 1947, the United Nations voted to partition Palestine into two enclaves, one that would be assigned to the Jewish Palestinians and a second that would be assigned to the Arab Palestinians. Over the twenty-five years that Great Britain governed Palestine (1922-1947) as the Mandatory authority, British, Anglo-British and League of Nations commissions had studied the matter and made their recommendations regarding the partition of the land. But it was the UN vote that provided international recognition and legitimacy to the Jewish state that was about to emerge.

Arab irregulars began their attacks almost immediately after the votes at Lake Success had been counted, and when, on May 14, 1948, David Ben-Gurion announced the birth of the State of Israel, Arab armies attacked from all sides. The State of Israel emerged at a heavy cost in lives, often those of new immigrants just off the boats. That a Jewish state was able to survive on this bitterly disputed territory despite the armed resistance of its Arab neighbors is nothing short of amazing, and indicates the very great challenges Israel faced at its birth, and is still facing today.

The seriousness of the external threats to the existence of a Jewish State is clear enough. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the *internal* struggle among Jews, especially between Orthodox and secular Jews, that began toward the end of the 19th century, when only a small contingent of Jews maintained a Jewish way of life in Palestine, while the vast majority of the world’s Jews lived in exile.<sup>1</sup> The State of

Israel that we know would never have come into being without the resolution of a profound debate between two opposing views of how and by whom that State should be established.

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One party argued vehemently that the only way for a Third Jewish Commonwealth to come into being would be with the advent of the Messiah. The other side argued equally vehemently that with Jews suffering so much prejudice and being so often massacred, it was necessary to create a safe haven for them by going to Palestine and working the land. They represent the Zionism that the world is now aware of.

It is not possible to discuss Messianism and Zionism, embedded as they are in the history of the Jewish people, without a brief summary of that history. That history is unique not only because of its length—more than 3000 years—but also because it is intimately

connected with the relationship of the Jewish people with God.

The destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans left the Jews in Palestine and elsewhere without a central sanctuary in which to make sacrifices. Jews could not so much as visit Jerusalem except for one day each year, to sit in ashes and mourn the loss of their Temple. There were no political leaders, and the priestly class (*cohanim*), who had seen to the rituals connected with the ancient Temple and protected the sanctity of the holy sites, no longer possessed either status or influence.

In these desperate conditions a new set of leaders emerged: the rabbis (teachers) who, in addition to establishing the canon of the Jewish Scriptures, re-imagined the structure of Jewish life and began to develop the notion of a Messiah, who would come from the lineage of King David. His first task, and the proof that he was the Messiah, would be to overthrow the Roman rulers of Palestine. Then he would see to the rebuilding of the ancient Temple, and, according to many of the “true believers,” would soon bring history to its ultimate conclusion. That last reality, referred to as the End Time, would include a Last Judgment and a resurrection of the dead.

Depending on the circumstances of the Jews in the various lands to which they scattered, this hope waxed and waned as Jews learned to live under a variety of more or less oppressive kings and other rulers—often threatened, jailed, killed, or burnt at the stake for being Jewish. They prayed constantly for the Temple to be restored and for Jerusalem to become a place to which they could make a pilgrimage, especially for the observance of the Passover.

A millennium passed while Jews suffered under both Christian and Muslim rule. The Crusades were a

disaster for the Jewish communities of the Rhineland. Where was the Messiah who would lead them back to Palestine? In 1665, in Smyrna, Turkey, a mystic named Shabbetai Tsvi was announced as the long awaited King and Messiah of the Jews. The evidence? He was born on a date that the rabbis had determined the Messiah would be born! Shabbetai Tsvi invited all the Jews to join him in a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and thousands responded as he made his way toward Palestine, but when brought before the Sultan of Turkey and given the choice of converting to Islam or being killed, he chose to convert.

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Most of those who had sold all their worldly goods and disrupted their lives to follow him went home exhausted and profoundly disappointed. But not everyone. Many of Shabbetai Tsvi's supporters remained loyal to him, and for a long time maintained a separate existence in the Muslim world. (A remnant exists to this day, and they worship at their own mosque in Turkey, but they are not considered Jews.)

Throughout this long and troubled period in Jewish history, some believed that if every male Jew could become sufficient learned in the Oral law,<sup>2</sup> or that if (according to the teaching of the mystic Isaac Luria) the Jews restored to the Deity the sparks of divinity had been embedded in the world since creation, the completion of either project would “facilitate” (some used the word “force”) the coming of the Messiah. Pious Jews accepted the rabbinic view that the reason the Messiah had not come was that the Jews had not proven themselves worthy.

Beginning in the late 18th century and increasingly thereafter, circumstances for Jews changed dramatically in Western Europe as they emerged from their ghettos. The French Revolution of 1789, with its call for liberty, equality and fraternity, offered the possibility that Jews might actually become citizens of the nation in which they lived. Napoleon and his armies broke down the ghetto walls of Italy and Germany (neither one of them yet a sovereign nation), making the possibility of citizenship more likely. Those Jews who were leaving the ghetto behind them and making their way into the non-Jewish world on the way to becoming citizens felt no need for a Messiah. For others, the hope persisted, as did the dream of return.

The first rabbi to encourage Jews to make *aliyah*<sup>3</sup> before the Messiah came was a Serbian Orthodox rabbi, Yehudah Alkalai, who in 1838 wrote:

The spirit of our time has freed all of the inhabitants of the earth to live where they wish, and granted them freedom to travel from country to country. It calls upon us to say to the prisoners—the Children of Israel—go free! The spirit of the times summons every people to reclaim its sovereignty and raise up its language; so too does it demand of us that we re-establish Zion, the center of

our life, and raise up our holy language and revive it.<sup>4</sup>

Toward the end of the 19th century, as anti-Semitic excesses and pogroms drove millions of Jews out of Russia, the Ukraine, and Poland, a new and more activist generation of Jews began to emerge in Europe. They directed their energy into practical steps to restore the Jewish homeland. They learned, for instance, to farm—a new reality for the Jewish community of Palestine, residing as almost all of them did only in the holy cities of Tiberias, Safed, Hebron, and Jerusalem, where almost all of the men were perpetual students of the Talmud, supported by charity from abroad. These young people formed societies called *Hovevey Tsiyyon* (lovers of Zion), and anticipated financial support from rich European Jews who would purchase the land.

These proto-Zionists, it is important to note, were secular Jews who had no particular use for rabbis or for religion. They simply wanted to create their own destiny in the Promised Land.

By contrast, Orthodox rabbis had nothing but contempt for those who, as they saw it, were trying to hasten the coming of the Messiah by activities other than studying the Talmud. Nor did most Reform rabbis in America and Germany in the 19th century want any part of a movement likely to call into question their loyalty to their new homeland. Some Reform Jewish leaders in America insisted that America was their Zion and that Washington was their Jerusalem. There was no need to ponder when there would be a Third Temple in Jerusalem; all references to “rebuilding the Temple” were expunged from the prayer book.

When Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern political Zionism, called for the first International Zionist Congress in Munich in 1897, the Orthodox rabbinate and the Reform Jewish commu-

nity in Germany rose up in unified opposition:

The National Association of German Rabbis considers the efforts of the so-called Zionists to establish a Jewish National State in the Land of Israel conflicts with the Messianic goal of Judaism as these are expressed in the Scriptures and other Jewish sources.

The Congress was held instead in Basle, Switzerland.

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A journalist from a very prominent, very assimilated Viennese family, Herzl had been assigned to represent a Viennese paper at the 1894 trial in Paris of Alfred Dreyfus. Dreyfus, a Jewish artillery officer in the French army, had been falsely accused of passing French military secrets to the Germans, publicly humiliated, dismissed from the army, and sent into exile. Even when it became clear that Dreyfus had been framed, the verdict still went against him. When Herzl heard the crowds outside shouting “*à bas les juifs*,” he realized that if a French mob could shout “down with the Jews”

a hundred years after the Revolution, then “liberty, equality and fraternity” was a false promise. Jews had to have a place where they could call home. Herzl visited with Kings and Czars, hopeful that one of the leaders he approached would be interested in sustaining a Jewish homeland. None responded.

The situation was far worse in Eastern Europe. Mobs encouraged by the government attacked and murdered Jews with impunity, which confirmed Herzl’s decision to act soon and decisively. He called the First Congress into session in July, 1897, and spelled out his goals for secular Zionist efforts. When the two hundred delegates had gone home, Herzl wrote in his diary: “At Basle I founded the Jewish State. If I said this aloud today, I would be greeted with universal laughter. In five years time, perhaps in fifty years, everyone will perceive it.” And exactly fifty years later at the UN meeting in Lake Success, he was proven to be a prophet.

Zionist Congresses were held every year until the Great War. Increasingly well-articulated and sometimes extremely opposing views were expressed about what should be happening (or not happening) on the ground in Palestine. Orthodox Jewry, most of whom still lived in Europe and European Russia, considered a deliberate return to Palestine as a rebellion against a Divine decree. In 1899, the head of one important segment of the Orthodox world offered this critique:

Only the advent of the Messiah could justify as well as enable a return of the scattered exiles to Palestine, and that therefore a political Zionist awakening, quite apart from its secular character, was a direct denial of Messianism for two reasons. First, that secular Zionism was inherently arrogant in seeking to bring redemption through human effort, and second, because secular Zionism

stopped short of the perfection of the original messianic vision, meaning that there was no expectation that the quality of life or the character of either individual Jews or all of the Jewish people together would radically be transformed by their efforts.

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Over time, however, Orthodox rabbis began to realize that with or without their approval, and despite their denial of the right of Jews to “hasten the End Time,” there might indeed be a Jewish entity of some sort established in Palestine. A few Orthodox rabbis who shared that vision created a religious Zionist party within the Orthodox movement, searching for a theological basis for supporting human efforts “hastening the End Time.”

Turkey’s defeat in World War I brought an end to the Ottoman Empire, of which Palestine was a small but crucial part. British forces “liberated” Jerusalem and the rest of Palestine, setting the stage for the British Mandate for Palestine. During the war, grateful for a discovery by a fervid

Zionist named Chaim Weizmann that had helped their war effort, the British government had agreed to stand behind the concept of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. A document—the Balfour Declaration—was prepared by the British Foreign Minister, Arthur Lord Balfour, and promulgated on Nov. 2, 1917:

His Majesty’s government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious right of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any country.

This is exactly the sort of response that Herzl had hoped to obtain twenty years earlier.

A new departure in the fierce debate about whether human efforts could have an effect on the advent of Messiah was provided by the first chief Rabbi of Palestine, Abraham Isaac Kook, who viewed the secular Zionists as *servant* the messianic promise:

It is not we who are forcing the end; the end is forcing us. And even if many God-fearing Jews had not heard the Divine voice charging them with the historical imperative of ending the exile, and even if many Zionists including some of the most devoted pioneers, have not seen fit to acknowledge the divine origin of the call on a deeper level both groups are moving in unison toward the fulfillment of the messianic purpose; it is Divine Providence that grips them, guiding them inexorably toward the final redemption of the people Israel.

However, Rabbi Kook’s son, Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Cook, narrowed the focus of the radical branch of the Orthodox community’s definition in the most contentious way possible. He put forth the notion that the Messianic aspect of Zionism should be focused on one single commandment: to obtain and settle all the land promised, not by the League of Nations and not by the United Nations or any other authority, but by the TaNaKh.<sup>5</sup>

In Chapter 15 of Genesis, God promises to Abraham all the land from Wadi El Arish, the “River of Egypt,” to the Euphrates in Mesopotamia, which includes Jordan, Syria and Iraq. No Jewish kingdom ever controlled even a significant portion of those lands, but by insisting on this “promise” as a necessary component of Zionism, this strand of Orthodox Zionist thought and its commitment to “keep every square inch” of the lands promised by God has hobbled every effort to come to terms with the reality of a Arab presence on that land.

Nineteen years after the establishment of the State of Israel, in June 1967, the Arab nations, led by Egypt and including (eventually) all of Israel’s neighbors, threatened to destroy Israel and drive all of its Jewish inhabitants into the sea. Outnumbered in every category—planes, tanks, ships and fighting men—Israel understood that there was no alternative to winning, so the Israelis struck first, destroying the air forces of Egypt and Syria on the ground, moving forward on all fronts, and liberating the Old City of Jerusalem, whose Jewish inhabitants had all been evicted in 1948, during Israel’s War of Independence. Barbed wire and mines soon lay between the Old City wall and West Jerusalem, which remained part of Israel.

Here’s how one Israeli journalist and author describes what happened during what became known as the Six Day War:

In six days Israel turned a threat to its existence into unimagined victory. [...] The victory enabled Israelis to celebrate in a way they had never celebrated before. With the world's Jewish population diminished by 6,000,000 Jews, a third of all the Jews on the planet, because of the Holocaust, a defeat in the 6-Day War might well have become the end of its ability to endure and to hope for redemption. And Israel had not merely survived; it had turned annihilation into a kind of redemption, awakening from its worst nightmare into its most extravagant dream. (Halevi xxi)

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That summer Israel was obsessed by messianic dreams of wholeness. There were those who believed that peace had finally come, and with it, the end of Jewish exile from humanity. Perhaps only Jews could conceive of a normal national life in Messianic terms. (Halevi xxii).

Nearly half a century has passed since the Temple Mount as well as the entire Old City of Jerusalem came under Israeli control, but while Jews were able to pray at the Western Wall, the actual Temple Mount, on which the Dome of the Rock and the El Aksa mosque stands, is still being managed by an Arab Council called the *wakf*, and Jews are allowed to walk over the Temple Mount but forbidden to pray there.

Israel still faces challenges internal and external to its very existence as a nation. The internal debates about whether Israel is the fulfillment of the Messianic dream, as claimed by some, or simply an arrogant act of human “hubris” as claimed by most Orthodox Jews, rages on unabated. Many secular Israelis to this day want nothing to do with the Orthodox and are content in their secular lives, living in a state which is not exactly a theocracy and not exactly a democracy either, although it has elements of both.

Judaism teaches that it is forbidden for Jews to lose hope. Israel's national anthem is a song called “Ha-tik-vah” (the hope), and it expresses the eternal hope for a restoration of a Jewish homeland: “So long as there resides in the innermost heart of a Jew the hope for return, there will be a time when they will return to their land and live as a free people.”

### Notes

1 The Jews had been exiled before. The kingdom that David established ended in 586 BCE, and the Jewish population exiled either to Babylonia or Egypt. But the exiles were enabled to return and rebuilt the Temple in 539 BCE under the aegis of King Cyrus. The second exile, in 70 CE, had no such redeeming history. By then, thousands of Jews lived in Rome, and an equal number lived in and around Alexandria in Egypt.

2 Study of the Oral Law meant delving deeply into the Talmud, the source for all the legislative and ritual requirements of being Jewish, as well as a practical guide to every aspect of life,

religious and secular. The Talmud was created in two separate locations—Palestine and Babylonia. The Babylonian Talmud is the more important.

3 The word means to “go up,” and since Palestine was the spiritual high point of the world, and Jerusalem the spiritual high point of Palestine, “making *aliyah*” meant moving permanently to the Promised Land.

4 The revival of a language that had not been spoken for two thousand years was almost as miraculous as the establishment of the Jewish state. As late as the 1930s, as thousands of German Jews fleeing Hitler descended on Palestine, it was not clear whether the language of the Jewish state would be Hebrew or German.

5 An acronym referring to Hebrew Scriptures: the T stands for *Torah*, the five books of Moses; the N for *Nevi'im*, the Prophets; the Kh for *Ketuvim*, the Writings.

### Works Cited and Consulted

Some time after November 2010, when I delivered this paper, with a slightly different title, at my Torch Club, I donated many of my sources to a local library, which has precluded providing exact references for some of my quotations. The following works, however, would be enlightening for any readers interested in further reading about the history of Zionism, the state of Israel, or the Jewish understanding of the Messiah.

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