

# Jewish Nationalism and Zionism

## Imagining a Modern Jewish State

### investigate

- Why did the idea of creating a modern Jewish state develop?
- How did the success or failure of emancipation in a country affect the Jews' support of such a state?
- What were the different visions of what the Jewish state should be?
- How does the existence of Israel influence our Jewish identities today?

### Key Words and Places

Ashkenazic Jews	World Zionist Organization (WZO)
Diaspora	Hatikvah
Nationalism	Uganda Plan
<i>Hovevei Tzion</i>	Second Aliyah
<i>Aliyah</i>	<i>Yishuv</i>
First Aliyah	Jewish National Fund (JNF)
Zionism	
First Zionist Congress	



### The BIG Picture

The Jewish longing for the Land of Israel is as old as the Diaspora—the dispersion of the Jews to countries outside of Israel. In the Bible we read of the Jewish exiles in Babylon who wept for Zion—Jerusalem—after the destruction of the Holy Temple in 586 BCE. The Book of Psalms expresses their grief in these words: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth...”

After the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, Jews prayed for the rebuilding of Zion. Century after century, we repeated such prayers at our Passover seders, on the fast of Tisha B'Av, which commemorates the Temple's destruction, and three times a day during the Amidah. Most Jews understood these prayers as an appeal for the speedy coming of the Messiah. But in the late 1800's, a small group of passionate Jews committed their lives to turning the dream of a return to Zion into a reality.

1882

- First Aliyah begins; brings first wave of Jews to Palestine in response to Zionism

1884

- Students and workers found *Hovevei Tzion* to work for establishment of Jewish state

1895

- French authorities unjustly convict Alfred Dreyfus, a French Jew, of spying

1897

- Herzl holds First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland



## Palestine Before 1880

For almost two thousand years after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, Palestine was controlled by a series of rulers from different countries and empires. Conditions were often difficult for the Jews of Palestine, but their fortunes improved in the early sixteenth century when the Ottoman Turks gained control. Although Jews had second-class status under Muslim law, the Turks were tolerant rulers. Palestine became a refuge for many Jews who had been forced out of Spain at the end of the fifteenth century.

Legal reforms in the 1840's and 1850's brought greater equality for the Jews and resulted in increased Jewish immigration. By 1880 there were about twenty thousand Jews in Palestine, making up about 5 percent of the population. The majority of the population was Muslim and Christian Arab. Most of the Jews were Sephardic Jews. But many of the newer arrivals were **Ashkenazic Jews**, Jews of German origin who came from Eastern Europe. Almost all the Jews lived in cities, settling in Safed, Tiberias, Hebron, and Jerusalem, considered particularly holy towns according to Jewish tradition. Most Jews lived in poverty, surviving on charity from the **Diaspora**, Jewish communities outside the Land of Israel.

1901

- Jewish National Fund founded

1903

- **World History:** Wright Brothers make world's first successful airplane flight

1905

- Second Aliyah begins; brings new wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine

1909

- Jewish settlers begin construction of city that will become Tel Aviv



Jews praying at the Western Wall, a supporting wall of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, in about 1880.

## The Dream of Jewish Nationalism

A wave of **nationalism**—pride in one’s nation—swept across Europe in the 1800’s. Nationalists argued that every nation—a people who shared a common language, history, and land—had a right to govern itself in its own homeland.

The influence of nationalism inspired a few dreamers to become *Jewish* nationalists. With the rise in antisemitism, more Jews were drawn to the idea of Jewish nationalism. Leon Pinsker, a Jewish doctor and author, believed that self-protection required that the Jews free themselves and live in a country of their own. Jews, Pinsker wrote, “are everywhere as *guests*, and nowhere *at home*.” Many of his followers were young students and workers in Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Romania. Organizing into small clubs called *Hovevei Tzion*, or Lovers of Zion, they held their first convention in 1884 and elected Pinsker as their president.

## The First Aliyah

Pinsker cared that a Jewish state be created, but not *where* it was created. In contrast, most of his followers believed that Jewish nationalism would

be meaningless unless its goal was a return to the Land of Israel. *Hovevei Tzion* began raising money, sponsoring classes in Jewish history and Hebrew, and organizing self-defense groups, called Maccabee clubs. Their goal: *aliyah*, “going up” to and settling in the Land of Israel.

The first group began arriving in Palestine in the summer of 1882. And so began what is known as the **First Aliyah**, the first wave of Jews who moved to Palestine in response to the movement to create a mod-

ern Jewish state. The First Aliyah took place from 1882 to 1903. Some of the new immigrants became artisans, shopkeepers, and hired farmhands. Others were poorly prepared to earn a living in Palestine and returned to Europe or moved to North America.

The existing Jewish community was very different from the nationalists of the First Aliyah. Unlike the new arrivals, their connection to the Land of Israel was based on religious ties and they were generally content to wait for the Messiah rather than build up the land.

The hardest among the new settlers soon established farming colonies. The first was named Rishon Ltziyon. By 1905 there were about twenty such settlements. Today, many have become thriving towns and cities. But in the early years most struggled to survive. Threatened by malaria, poverty, and a lack of farming experience, the early Jewish colonists often lived on the edge of ruin.

## Theodor Herzl

Meanwhile, events in Europe gave new life to **Zionism**, the movement to create a modern



The name Rishon L'tziyon was inspired by this biblical reference to the coming of the Messiah: “Behold, here they are, the first to bring the news of the Messiah to Zion—*rishon l'tziyon*” (Isaiah 41:27). Why do you think the settlers chose that name?

Jewish state. In 1895, Theodor Herzl, a young Austrian-Jewish journalist, was in Paris when Colonel Alfred Dreyfus, a French Jew, was unjustly convicted of spying. On January 6, 1895, Herzl witnessed Dreyfus’s humiliation as he was publicly stripped of his rank. Herzl listened in horror as the crowd of twenty thousand shouted, “Death to the traitor! Death to the Jews!”

Responding to this injustice, Herzl published a short book called *The Jewish State*. His message: emancipation had been a failure for the Jews; they still were not safe in Europe. Only a massive movement from Europe to their own land would end antisemitism.

Herzl’s ideas received an icy reception from leading Jews in the West. The Jews of Western Europe were full citizens and most were eager to demonstrate their patriotism to the nations in which they lived. But the Jews in Eastern Europe and Russia were not yet emancipated. Thus Herzl’s ideas sparked great excitement among them.

On August 29, 1897, Herzl held the **First Zionist Congress** in Basel, Switzerland. More than two hundred delegates from Jewish communities in sixteen different countries elected Herzl as their leader and adopted his plan. They founded the **World Zionist Organization (WZO)** and made **Hatikvah**, meaning “The Hope,” the hymn of the Zionist movement.

So as not to offend the Turks, the Congress avoided using the term “state” in describing Zionism’s goals. But in his diary Herzl declared: “In Basel, I created the Jewish State.”

### To Be or Not to Be a Jewish State

For the next few years, Herzl traveled tirelessly from capital to capital, meeting with leaders of the great powers, working to win support for the idea of a homeland for the Jews. While he hoped it would be in Palestine, his first concern was to achieve the political goal of establishing a state. Herzl wanted a state for the Jews, not necessarily a “Jewish” state. He had given a lot of thought to a future state’s form of government and economy, but he was not especially concerned about the content of its Jewish culture. Herzl assumed, for example, that its official language would be German, not Hebrew.

So, when Herzl determined that the Ottoman rulers had no intention of parting with Palestine, he was open to considering other options. One such option was the British offer of land in East Africa. That option became known as the **Uganda Plan**.

## Theodor Herzl

Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) was an unlikely father of Zionism. Born into a middle-class family in Budapest, Herzl was a great admirer of German culture and spent most of his early life trying to fit into European high society. While studying at the University of Vienna, he joined a respected fraternity with few Jewish members.

Despite Herzl's best hopes, the anti-semitism of his fraternity brothers forced him to quit the group in disgust. He suffered another painful blow when Vienna elected an openly antisemitic mayor. But it was the antisemitism in France, home of the ideals of "Liberty, Equality, and Brotherhood," that troubled Herzl most.

At first, antisemitism made Herzl ashamed of his Jewish identity. As late as 1893, he proposed the idea of a mass conversion of Jews to Catholicism. But Herzl changed his mind less than six months after Dreyfus was sent to Devil's Island prison. By then, he had concluded that founding a Jewish state was the only solution for the Jews of Europe.

Herzl's Zionist slogan was: "If you will it, it is no dream."  
What do you think that means?

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Describe a dream that Jews might have today? What could you do to help that dream come true?

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Theodor Herzl  
(standing left of center)  
addressing the First  
Zionist Congress



## The Uganda Plan

Imagine that you are at the Sixth Zionist Congress and the Uganda Plan is being debated. You are alarmed by the immediate danger under which many European Jews are living, especially in Russia where pogroms are a constant threat. Would you support the establishment of a Jewish home in East Africa? Or would you insist that the Jewish homeland be in the Land of Israel? Why?

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But many Zionists believed that creating a modern Jewish culture in the historic Jewish homeland was essential to the Jewish people's survival. None was more passionate than Asher Ginsberg, a gifted Russian Jewish writer who was known by his pen name, Aḥad Ha'am, meaning "One of the People." Aḥad Ha'am believed that Jews needed to return to their historic center—the Land of Israel, *Eretz Yisrael*—and develop a modern, secular Jewish culture that would bring unity to the Jewish people.

Aḥad Ha'am knew that many Jews would remain in the Diaspora even if a Jewish homeland was created. He believed that a Jewish homeland and national culture would enable

Diaspora Jewry to survive and flourish: "From [the Jewish] center [in Palestine] the spirit of Judaism will go forth...to all the communities of the Diaspora, and will breathe new life into them and preserve their unity."

## The Second Aliyah

A new wave of immigrants arrived from Russia from 1905 to 1914. Called the **Second Aliyah**, it was driven by deadly pogroms in 1903 and a failed anti-czarist revolution in 1905. It had a powerful effect on the *Yishuv*, which is what the Zionist community in Palestine came to be called. (The Hebrew word *yishuv* means

## Warning: Danger Ahead

Despite his passionate support of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel, Aḥad Ha'am voiced his deep concern that Palestine's majority Arab population would be hostile to Zionism.

Most Zionists ignored his concern. They convinced themselves that the Arabs would welcome the Jews. They expected the Arabs to be grateful to the Jews for bringing modern European culture to Palestine, including new technology and cures for diseases. The Zionists failed to imagine that the Arabs might develop their own nationalist feelings and resent becoming a minority in a land they, too, considered theirs.

While the Jewish population remained relatively small, few Arabs focused on the threat Zionism might pose for them. But as the Jewish population grew, Aḥad Ha'am's warning of conflict increasingly became a major concern.

“settlement.”) Many of Israel's future leaders, including its first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, and its second president, Yitzḥak ben Zvi, arrived during this period. Many came with only knapsacks on their backs and dreams of a just and modern Jewish state in their minds.

Unlike the earlier wave of immigrants, those who arrived during the Second Aliyah were committed to Socialist ideals. They dreamed of building up *Eretz Yisrael* with their own hands and experimented with new forms of cooperative living and farming.

A key figure in the Second Aliyah was Aaron David Gordon, who arrived in Palestine in 1904. Gordon believed that life in the Diaspora had made the Jews weak because it had disconnected them from the soil. He wanted to create a modern Jewish society in *Eretz Yisrael*. Gordon believed that manual labor would not only help strengthen the Jews, it would also enable them to rebuild their culture. He insisted that pioneers rely solely on “Hebrew

## The Revival of Hebrew

From the moment Eliezer Perelman arrived in Jerusalem in 1882, he devoted himself to reviving Hebrew as a spoken language. First he changed his last name from Perelman to Ben-Yehuda. Next he persuaded his wife, Deborah, that they should speak only Hebrew in their home. Their eldest son, Ben-Tziyon (meaning “son of Zion”), is said to have been the first Hebrew-speaking child in modern history.

Ben-Yehuda realized that Hebrew had to be modernized if it was to be used in daily life. He spent years developing new Hebrew vocabulary to describe modern times. When possible, he constructed new words by using the roots of older, related words. For example, he created the modern Hebrew word *rakevet*, which means “train,” from the root letters of the ancient Hebrew word for chariot.

Unlike the governments in Western Europe, the czars refused to emancipate the Jews. So, greater numbers of Russian Jews than Western European Jews were motivated to support the creation of a Jewish state where they would be free.

### Jews in Russia

- ⊙ Laws restricted where Jews were permitted to live.
- ⊙ The Jews did not have the same rights as Christians.
- ⊙ The Jews were plagued by pogroms.

### Jews in Western Europe

- ⊙ Jews could choose where they lived.
- ⊙ By the late nineteenth century, the Jews had equal rights in many countries.
- ⊙ Antisemitism was reduced for a while.

labor” rather than hiring Arabs. Gordon and the pioneers of the Second Aliyah were trying to create “new Jews,” Jews who would disprove the antisemitic stereotypes of weakness.

The newcomers acquired new lands to settle and cultivate by turning to the **Jewish National Fund (JNF)**. Created in 1901, the JNF bought land in Palestine to be owned by the entire Jewish people.

While this “back to the soil” movement inspired some of the new immigrants, many others settled in the cities. By 1908 the largely Arab port city of Jaffa was home to more than six thousand Jews. In 1909, with the help of the JNF, a group of settlers bought some nearby sand dunes and began construction. In time, a city was built and became known as Tel Aviv, meaning “Hill of the Spring”—a name that came from Ezekiel 3:15 and suggested rebirth. Just five years later, Tel Aviv had over two thousand residents.

Most of the approximately fifteen thousand immigrants who came during the Second Aliyah soon became disillusioned and left Palestine. Daily life was extremely harsh for those who remained. Food and other necessities were meager, and health conditions risky. Gordon’s wife was one of many who died of malaria.



Today, JNF certificates like this are sent to people who have been honored with the planting of a tree in Israel.





This photograph shows the founders of Tel Aviv in the spring of 1909, when the modern city was only a dream.

Many of the pioneers remained single and childless during their first years in the *Yishuv*. Their idealism and energies were focused on working the land and building up political organizations and unions.

### Foundation for the Future

In just a few decades Zionists built a solid movement and established over forty agricultural colonies and villages in the Land of Israel. The Jewish population of Palestine had grown to about sixty thousand—a little less than 10 percent of the total population. Hebrew was reborn as a language for daily life, and the young suburb of Tel Aviv was well on its way to becoming the first modern Jewish city.


But of all the Jews who left Russia from 1881 to 1914, only about 3 percent moved to Palestine. For the majority, Zionism and the Land of Israel were not a solution to the problems of economic hardship, antisemitism, and lack of political freedom. For them, it was the United States—not Palestine—that was the land of promise.



Like these women, many of the pioneers were committed to working the land. A popular folk song summed up their goals: “We’ve come to this Land to build and to be rebuilt by it.” What do you think these lyrics mean?



# then & NOW



Few European Jews in the mid-1800's were inspired to literally fulfill the Passover haggadah's prayer "Next Year in Jerusalem." Instead, excited by the new possibilities of emancipation, they intended to remain where they were. But by the end of the century, faced with the continuing violence of antisemitism and the unfulfilled dreams of emancipation, increasing numbers turned to Zionism as a source of hope and their vision for the future.

1. Do you think that creating a Jewish state in the Land of Israel was a good solution to the problem of antisemitism? Why or why not?

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2. Today, most Jews live in democratic countries where they are free to live as they want without fear of antisemitism. Do you think there is still a need for a Jewish state? Why or why not?

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3. Just as Jews differed in their opinions about what the Jewish state should be like in the time of Herzl and Gordon, today Jews both in Israel and in the Diaspora often disagree on what the Jewish state should be like.

How might the difference of opinions benefit the Jewish people?

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Why might the difference of opinions be a problem?

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