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978-1-107-00594-5 - The Political Philosophy of Zionism: Trading Jewish Words for a Hebraic Land

Eyal Chowers

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The Political Philosophy of Zionism

Trading Jewish Words for a Hebraic Land

Zionism emerged at the end of the nineteenth century in response to a rise in anti-Semitism in Europe, to a deteriorating economic predicament for Jews in Eastern Europe, and to the crisis of modern Jewish identity. This novel, national revolution aimed to unite a scattered community defined mainly by shared texts and literary tradition into a vibrant political entity destined for the Holy Land. As this remarkable book demonstrates, however, Zionism was about much more than a national political ideology and practice. This movement pictured time as wholly open and aesthetic in nature, attempted to humanize space through collective action, and enlivened the Hebrew language but stripped it of its privileged ontological status in Judaism. By tracing the origins of Zionism in the context of a European history of ideas, and by considering the writings of key Jewish and Hebrew writers and thinkers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this book offers an entirely new philosophical perspective on Zionism as a unique movement based on intellectual boldness and belief in human action. In counterdistinction to the studies of history and ideology that dominate the field, this book also offers a new way of reflecting on contemporary Israeli politics.

Eyal Chowers is a Senior Lecturer of Political Science at Tel Aviv University in Israel, where he also serves as the co-head of the graduate program in political leadership. He is the author of *The Modern Self in the Labyrinth: Politics and the Entrapment Imagination* (2004).



A poster by the Histadrut, The General Federation of Labor in Israel, calling upon new immigrants that came to Israel in the 1950s to take part in the mass campaign “hanchalat halashon” (fostering the language) and register for Hebrew classes provided by the Histadrut and other organizations all over the country. The poster was created by Eliyahu Vardimon (the exact year is unknown). Courtesy of The Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

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Acknowledgments

I started working on this project a long time ago, erroneously believing it would take me just a few years to complete. But the more I delved into the subject of Zionism and its relation to modernity, the more subtle and fascinating this subject became, in my opinion at least.

There are certainly many downsides to writing a book over an extended period of time, but one of the advantages is that one can consult with and benefit from many friends, colleagues, and students.

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I am beholden to Eliyahu Vardimon (1912–81), the creator of the beautiful poster reprinted on the cover of this book. Mr. Vardimon, a chaltz, artist, designer, and author of archaeology books, came to Mandatory Palestine from Dresden, Germany, in 1934. He created many posters for various Zionist organizations such as the Jewish National Fund and Keren Hayesod, and he was a chief designer of numerous international exhibitions representing the government of Israel and others. Vardimon's poster conveys the attempt of Zionists to displace foreign languages with Hebrew, not to trade Jewish words for a Hebraic land – but as we shall see, these ideas are akin.

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I would like to dedicate this book to two young and extraordinary persons I loved who died during their military service: Michal Amit (1961–80) and my cousin Ephraim Chowers (1960–82).

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