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.
The Political Philosophy of Zionism

Trading Jewish Words for a Hebraic Land

EYAL CHOWERS

Tel Aviv University
Contents

List of Illustrations page vii
Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1
1. Jews and the Temporal Imagination of Modernity 19
   I. Kant and the Future Integration of Human Space 24
   II. Semicyclical and the Poetic Redemption of Time 36
   III. Spatial Mobility, Self-Interest, and the Ascent of Present-Centeredness 60
2. The Zionist Temporal Revolution 72
   I. Judaism and Revolution 76
   II. The Skeleton of History 82
   III. Zionism and Sundered History 94
   IV. From Sundered History to Building 109
3. The End of Building 115
   I. Building as an End in Itself 121
   II. Zionism, Discontinuity, and Modernist Architecture 128
   III. Belonging and the World of Matter 133
   IV. Belonging and the Humanization of Space 136
   V. Community of Builders 142
   VI. Telishut 148
4. Hebrew and Politics 153
   I. Can Man be the Measure of All Things in Hebrew? 157
   II. Language, Collective Spirit, and Teleological Time: Abad Ha’am 171
   III. Language, Time, and Revolution: Chaim Nachman Bialik 189
vi

Contents

5. Democratic Language and Zionism 215
   I. Language and Revealmment 218
   II. Democratic Language and Tradition 226
Conclusion 241

Bibliography 257
Index 271
List of Illustrations

1. Israel and Rivka Pollack upon their arrival at the moshav Ein Ayala, Israel (1951). Photo by Zoltan Kluger, courtesy of The Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem. page 18


4. A poster announcing a boxing competition (1943). Photo courtesy of The Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem. 108

5. Jewish laborers on the shore near Tel Aviv loading camels with sand for building. Photo by Zoltan Kluger, August 1, 1939. Courtesy of the Government Press Office, Israel. 114

6. A construction worker, Rothschild Boulevard, Tel Aviv. Photo by Ze’ev Aleksandrowicz, 1933. 120

7. A worker at a brick manufacturing factory in Tel Aviv. Photo by Hans Pinn, June 1, 1946. Courtesy of the Government Press Office, Israel. 128
List of Illustrations


9. Lord Arthur Balfour addressing the audience at the opening ceremony of the Hebrew University (1925). Unknown photographer; photo courtesy of The Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem. 151

10. Notrim (or Gafirim, members of the Jewish police force set up by the British administration in Mandatory Palestine) guarding the Hebrew University on Mount Scopus (1947). Photo by Ya’akov Ben-Dov, courtesy of The Central Zionist Archives. 151

11. A donkey carrying books for the National Library at the Hebrew University. Unknown photographer and year; photo courtesy of The Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem. 152


14. Chaim Nachman Bialik (1925). Unknown photographer; photo courtesy of The Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem. 191

15. A poster issued during the 1950s by Haifa’s city council as part of a national effort to teach the new Jewish immigrants Hebrew. Poster courtesy of The Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem. 213

16. A poster issued by the Ministry of Education during the 1950s explaining basic concepts regarding transportation and travel to new immigrants. Poster courtesy of The Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem. 214

Acknowlegements

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.

I would like to thank Janet Benton, Leora Bilsky, Eppie Kreitner, David Myers, Natalie Oman, Yoav Peled, Nancy Schwartz, Idith Zertal, and Yael Zerubavel for reading parts of this manuscript and helping me to improve it substantially. Thanks, especially, to Charles Blattberg and Aharon Klieman for their many useful comments and for being generous with their time. I also benefited from illuminating discussions with Revital Amiran, Seyla Benhabib, Eva Illouz Yaron Ezrahi, Azar Gat, Ariel Hirschfeld, Steven Smith, Bernard Yack, and Ronald Zweig. Thanks also to Lior Erez, Dimitry Kortukov, and Yonatan Preminger from Tel Aviv University for their help at different stages, as well as to Anat Banin and Nechma Kanner from the Zionist Archives.

I would also like to thank the Shalem Center in Jerusalem for supporting the early parts of my research and for its hospitality, and the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute for allowing me to use its splendid library for many years.

My students at Tel Aviv University (and, during one semester, at Yale University) have been extremely helpful in the formation of this book. They have tolerated my half-baked ideas during many classes, challenged me, and enriched my thought immensely; I am very grateful to them.
Acknowledgments

I am beholden to Eliyahu Vardimon (1912–81), the creator of the beautiful poster reprinted on the cover of this book. Mr. Vardimon, a chalutz, 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.

Many thanks also to my editor, Marigold Acland, for her trust, insightful guidance, and very substantial help along the way. I have also benefited much from the comments of the anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press.

In the production of this book, I was very fortunate to receive excellent professional assistance and a friendly attitude from Phyllis Berk, Mark Fox, and Regina Paleski. Thanks also to Joy Mizan for her patience and for facilitating the communication among all those involved.

I am especially grateful to Yael Agam, who encouraged me along the way.

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).

Acknowledgments
