

I

Introduction

Modern Zionism, as Arthur Hertzberg wrote in the introduction to his classic text *The Zionist Idea*, “represents a crisis [...] in the essential meaning of Jewish messianism.”¹ Indeed, a great deal of literature has examined this crisis and the complex relationship between Zionism and Jewish messianic yearnings and ideas. Originally published in 1959, Hertzberg’s volume, and particularly his introduction, constituted an effort to introduce the topic of Zionism into serious, rigorous scholarship and represented an explicitly stated attempt to question what had been a prevalent position in the interpretation of Zionism up until that point, represented in particular (as Hertzberg points out) by the Zionist (and later Israeli) historian Ben-Zion Dinur. Dinur, and others who took similar approaches, had presented modern Zionism as standing “in an unending line of messianic stirrings and rebellions against an evil destiny.” Based in an enduring bond between the nation and the Land, according to this historiographical approach, Zionism emerges as “the consummation of Jewish history under the long-awaited circumstances afforded by the age of liberalism and nationalism.” In one of what would become a multigenerational series of similar accusations, Hertzberg charged that this was in fact not scholarly historiography at all but rather “a kind of synthetic Zionist ideology presented as history.”²

Critical though he was of such approaches, however, neither did Hertzberg consider Zionism to be entirely *unrelated* to traditions of

¹ Arthur Hertzberg, *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader* (Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 1997), 20.

² *Ibid.*, 16–17.

Jewish Messianism – as is evident, of course, in his detection of Zionism's roots in a crisis of Jewish messianism. Messianism, in other words, *was* central to understanding Zionism as he understood it. Its place, he suggested however, had to be conceived very differently and the relationship between the two formulated as far more complex and fraught. Zionism, Hertzberg, wrote, was indeed “the heir of the messianic impulse and emotions of the Jewish tradition, but it is much more than that.”³ And that “much more,” as he would argue, was no less fundamental to understanding Zionism, its place in Jewish history, and its place in modern history broadly conceived. It is some unexplored aspects of that “much more” that the present book seeks to take up.

The question of this relationship was not laid to rest, of course, with Hertzberg's publication. As had been the case before him – and in subsequent years too, as scholarship on Zionism and Israel would expand to the extent that, by the 1980s, “Israel Studies” would become a field in its own right – the question of messianism (in various forms), ideas of redemption, and their role in Zionism would continue to constitute one important focal point of research. If Hertzberg had taken issue with what he identified as an ideology-driven reading of Zionist history that had preceded him, subsequent generations of historians would often undertake to distance themselves yet again from what they too identified as mobilized historiographies. The evolution of scholarship on Zionism would see the emergence of a range of new efforts to understand the relationship between the modern Jewish national movement and the messianic traditions that had preceded it.

As is to be expected, a multiplicity of views has emerged. Alongside scholars who continue to place redemptive ideas at the center, others have argued for their marginality or even something approaching irrelevance. Eli Lederhendler, for example, has contended that the “metaphorical use of messianic terminology” by Jewish Enlighteners and by their nationalist heirs was in fact just that – metaphorical – and that such use was “in reality a way of fostering a this-worldly consciousness, not a way to preach Redemptionist theology.” Such rhetoric, he suggests, serves as evidence “not of the *continuity* of messianism within Judaism, but of *discontinuity*.” In the final analysis, according to Lederhendler, redemptive language served as “a mythic factor” and a tool of “oratory” but could only do so after it had been all but emptied of its eschatological and even its redemptive content.⁴

³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴ Eli Lederhendler, “Interpreting Messianic Rhetoric in the Russian Haskalah and Early Zionism,” in Jonathan Frankel (ed.), *Jews and Messianism in the Modern Era – Metaphor*

A similar point is made even more stridently by Yaacov Shavit, who argues that “messianic ideas played only a peripheral role in determining political culture and action” in pre-state Zionism and that the “most important use of messianism was simply as metaphor or rhetoric.” Shavit points in this context to a need for clarification of terms since “the concept messianism is all too often used vaguely, tendentiously or without distinguishing different shades of meaning.” This need is all the more acute, he notes, given the multiple expressions and approaches to messianism in Jewish tradition.⁵

Just what is redemptive, messianic, eschatological – what connects these concepts, what separates them, and what elements of them find expression in the history of thought and praxis in Zionism – is a complicated question that requires a great deal of conceptual untangling. Although this book is not a philosophical treatise, one of its goals is to try to make at least some sense of what these words – or really one of them in particular, “redemption” or “redemptive” – may actually mean or may have meant in the contexts of Zionism’s history. I seek its meanings here not through a direct philosophical or conceptual exposition but by attempting to see the ways in which such notions were actually expressed – in thought as well as in actions – at certain critical junctures in that history. For the moment, suffice it to say that, in contrast to Lederhendler’s or Shavit’s understanding of this issue, the underlying postulate informing this book is that of a palpable presence, taking multiple forms, of what may be termed a redemptive spirit and vision that animated much of Zionism. And yet, their cautionary notes are important, in particular in making a clear distinction between what I consider to be a prominent – indeed, all but ubiquitous – redemptive dimension in a great deal of Zionism, on the one hand, and a *messianic* impulse on the other. If messianism is to be understood, as Shavit suggests, as expecting and demanding an extrahistorical intervention, “the impatient and expectant hope for a single, dramatic, all-embracing redemption that would create a radically new world”⁶ in a single stroke, then indeed, one must concur that most Zionists were distinctly non-messianic in their approach. Messianism of a kind that represented “a complete repudiation of the

and Meaning (Studies in Contemporary Jewry, an Annual, Vol. VII, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 14–33. Reprinted in Eli Lederhendler, *Jewish Responses to Modernity: New Voices in America and Eastern Europe* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 23–46.

⁵ Yaacov Shavit, “Realism and Messianism in Zionism and the Yishuv,” in Frankel (ed.), *Jews and Messianism in the Modern Era*, 100–127.

⁶ *Ibid.*, “Realism and Messianism in Zionism and the Yishuv,” 121.

world as it is, placing its hope in a future whose realization can only be brought about by the destruction of the old order”⁷ surely was, as Shavit claims, the purview only of the radical (left and right) fringes of Zionism, although one may catch glimpses of the temptations it offered beyond those fringes. Yet in his apparent fervor to cleanse Zionism of any such messianic impulse, Shavit himself overlooked another much-needed distinction – that between messianism understood in this way, on the one hand, and a *redemptive* impulse and vision that formed the content of a great deal of Zionist thinking and shaped a great deal of Zionist work.

Much of Zionism, much of the time, I argue here, entailed redemptive visions that can fairly be categorized as belonging to a kind of “radical hope,” a set of “images for new ways of existing in the face of extreme adversity,”⁸ that would prove to be potent historical forces. This was articulated and developed in important respects through ongoing, multi-vocal conversations that Zionist thought and praxis maintained with Jewish, Christian, and secular-political redemptive ideas. Indeed, as I hope to show in the ensuing pages, redemptive ideas – perhaps one might in fact call it a redemptive *faith* of various shapes and shades – are central to Zionism’s (disparate) self-understandings, its principal goals, and its (sometimes divergent) visions of the future. The redemption envisioned by many Zionists, moreover, was one that, naturally, placed the Jewish people at its center but, more often than not, saw Zionism’s redemptive task as extending beyond the Jews themselves to include visions of human, and in some cases even cosmic, redemptions.

I am not the first, of course, to point to this palpable presence of some form of redemptive spirit among many Zionists. Indeed, not only Hertzberg but a number of other scholars have suggested that this dimension is indispensable to an understanding of Zionism. Anita Shapira, for example, has written that one need only “scratch away the empirical coating from a Zionist leader – to discover a pulsating messianic belief.”⁹ David Ohana – who has done probably more than any other scholar to explore the role of what he calls “Promethean” messianism in Zionist thought, primarily that of Israel’s founding prime minister, David Ben-Gurion – has argued forcefully for the place of what he characterizes

⁷ Anson Rabinbach, “Between Enlightenment and Apocolypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism,” *New German Critique* 34 (1985), 81.

⁸ See Akiba J. Lerner, *Redemptive Hope: From the Age of Enlightenment to the Age of Obama* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 9.

⁹ Anita Shapira, “Ha-Tzionut ve-ha-Meshihiut ha-Medinit” (Zionism and Political Messianism), in *Ha-Halicha al Kav ha-Ofek* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1989), 18.

as a secularized, perhaps Nietzscheanized, adoption of redemptive ideas in the writings of that central figure.¹⁰ He has received important reinforcement from others, such as Nir Kedar.¹¹ From an entirely different direction and with differing emphases, Moshe Idel, one of the leading scholars of Jewish mysticism and messianism, has argued for the presence of a “messianic orientation in early Israeli scholarship” – in other words, for a messianic vision contained in the academic work of the first generation of Israeli scholars (echoing some of Hertzberg’s critique of those scholars).¹² The arguments I present in this book, then, are in many respects closer to (and in some aspects indebted to) the sensibilities expressed by these latter scholars, with the added qualification, continuing Shavit’s call for terminological clarification, that one must distinguish more clearly between the messianic and the redemptive. In many respects, then, I continue the line of inquiry represented by these latter scholars and argue that redemptive ideas and motivations not only were present in Zionism from its outset but played important roles beyond the realm of thought and vision.

Certain figures within Zionism have been identified as particularly imbued with redemptive – indeed, at times messianic – orientations. Martin Buber is surely at the top of this list. For him, as Paul Mendes-Flohr has written, “the return of the Jews to Zion marks not only their return to history, but more significantly also their return to the sacred center of Jewish existence.” For Buber, Mendes-Flohr explains, “the very name Zion [. . .] has a mythic claim on the Jews, and has retained from them, despite their secularization, its sacred, transcendental power.”¹³ Indeed, Buber’s Zionism, as Akiba Lerner has characterized it, was rooted in part in an “urgency to link the idealistic/utopian quality of messianism to endeavors of concrete actualization.”¹⁴ Gershom Scholem, by contrast,

¹⁰ See, for example, David Ohana, *Political Theologies in the Holy Land: Israeli Messianism and Its Critics* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2010).

¹¹ Nir Kedar, “‘We Need the Messiah So That He May Not Come’: On David Ben-Gurion’s Use of Messianic Language,” *Israel Affairs* 19:3 (2013), 393–409.

¹² Moshe Idel, “Messianic Scholars: On Early Israeli Scholarship, Politics and Messianism,” *Modern Judaism* 32:1 (2012), 22–53.

¹³ Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Nationalism as a Spiritual Sensibility: the Philosophical Suppositions of Buber’s Hebrew Humanism,” in *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 189–190.

¹⁴ Lerner qualifies this, however, pointing to the “unease” that Buber shared with Scholem regarding the potentially explosive antinomian implications of acute messianism and his celebration of Hasidism’s sublimation of this potential through the notion of “redemption of the everyday.” See Lerner, *Redemptive Hope*, 51–52.

as some have characterized him, sought to sublimate the redemptive urge or to distance it from any real-world politics, removing it instead to the realm of academic scholarship.¹⁵ Indeed, his famous letter to Franz Rosenzweig, in which he cautioned that “the apocalyptic thorn”¹⁶ that is inherent in the Hebrew language will not be neutralized by the ostensible secularization of the language, can be seen in some sense as standing as the diametrical opposite of Buber’s stance in this instance: both identify the “volcano” of sacral and redemptive themes that are inherent in the Zionist project (not only its Hebrew language project). For Scholem this is a cause for extreme caution, whereas Buber identifies a spiritual depth and strength that comes from it. Yet Scholem himself seems at times more ambivalent than has often been acknowledged. Although he sublimated such impulses into the realm of academic research, he was clearly fascinated with redemptive ideas and messianic movements in Jewish history. In an interview given toward the end of his life, he rejected the notion that he was an “anti-messianist,” adding with a candor that evinced an understanding of his own act of sublimation that in fact “I have a strong inclination toward it. I have not given up on it.”¹⁷

The stormy poetry of Uri Zvi Greenberg was redolent with messianic expectations which, as Hannan Hever has written, reflected the self-image of the poet himself and the redemptive role of poetry in Hebrew culture in Palestine as he understood it.¹⁸ Anita Shapira presents Greenberg’s world as that of “a member of an apocalyptic cult.”¹⁹ It is in the profound dissatisfaction that Greenberg developed with Zionist praxis shortly after immigrating to Palestine that one can find a useful illustration of the distinction for which I am arguing: Greenberg, as virtually all scholars agree, was distinctly messianic in his approach. Those with whom he was so deeply disappointed were not, although visions of redemption saturated their thought and deeply informed their praxis.²⁰

¹⁵ Lerner, *Redemptive Hope*, 51.

¹⁶ Gershom Scholem to Franz Rosenzweig, December 26, 1926, as cited and translated in William Cutter, “Ghostly Hebrew, Ghostly Speech: Scholem to Rosenzweig, 1926,” *Prooftexts* 10:3 (1990), 413–433.

¹⁷ Muki Tzur and Gershom Scholem, “With Gershom Scholem: An Interview,” in Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 26.

¹⁸ See, for example, “Te’ologia Politit be-‘Am Levadad’ me’et Uri Zvi Greenberg,” in Hannan Hever, *Be-kho’ach ha-El: Te’ologia Politit ba-Sifrut ha-Ivrit ha-Modernit* (Jerusalem: The Van Leer Institute and Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me’uhad, 2013), 90–97.

¹⁹ Anita Shapira, “Uri Zvi Greenberg – Apocalypse Now,” *Zion* 56:2 (1991), 173–192.

²⁰ Compare Shavit, “Realism and Messianism in Zionism and the Yishuv,” 113–117.

Questions pertaining to the relationship between Zionism and forms of redemptive or messianic thought, then, have accompanied the call to return to Zion since before the advent of the name Zionism in the late nineteenth century, and they have been a recurring feature of efforts to study Zionism. What is of particular interest to me, however, is the ubiquity and prevalence of redemptive motifs, sometimes in less immediately obvious corners of Zionist thought and the Zionist project and among thinkers and actors who are less immediately identified as looking toward the redemptive. The fact of their ubiquity even in these less anticipated places suggests to me an even more thoroughgoing prevalence. If Hannan Hever has suggested that Uri Zvi Greenberg's political theology "brought to the surface the theological face [of Zionism], which secularizing Zionism had removed from its conscious awareness,"²¹ I hope to suggest that this theological dimension, along with its redemptive thrust, was never in fact very effectively repressed or distanced from ("secularizing") Zionist consciousness at all. As I will argue in the following pages, diverse visions and understandings of redemption not only constituted central conceptual elements of a great deal of Zionist thought but acted as an operative force whose palpable presence can be demonstrated in a considerable variety of Zionist undertakings. Beyond their ubiquity as ideas, in other words, I hope to add a number of additional dimensions to this historiographical conversation.

First, I have attempted not only to analyze the actual substance and contents of such redemptive beliefs but to trace their intellectual and theological roots, as well as the often-ambivalent dialogues that Zionist formulations of these visions conducted with those roots. As the structure of the book makes clear, I argue for three distinct sources, or sounding-boards, of the redemptive thrust in Zionism: Jewish messianic traditions, Christian notions of salvation (particularly where these were bound up with the Holy Land), and secular political messianic ideologies.

In addition to this genealogy of the ideas, I have attempted to analyze the ways in which these beliefs impacted tangible Zionist endeavors. What I have tried to do in this book, in other words, is to create a bridge between a deepened examination of this intellectual history and a cultural-historical approach that analyzes the various ways in which these ideas were given tangible cultural form. These concrete products included books and other textual artifacts; ideological and political rivalries and battles; the reshaping, or at times invention, of traditions, customs, and

²¹ Hever, "Te'ologia Politit," 93.

rituals; efforts at place-making, or, in other words, the often competing efforts to reshape the landscape and public spaces of the territory known as Palestine/the Holy Land/the Land of Israel, alongside undertakings designed to generate new meanings associated with specific sites within that land; and the formulation and molding of relations with imperial powers (most obviously, the British rulers of Palestine from 1918 to 1948) and with the local Arab population, as well as with religious bodies – Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. All of these aspects of the story belong more in the realm of cultural history and represent the bridging of idea, ideology, and (arguably) theology, on the one hand, and tangible undertakings and products on the other.

I have chosen to prioritize the notion of what I have called “redemptive” visions and ideas, rather than “messianic.” A number of considerations have motivated this choice. First, “redemption” is, it seems, a broader and potentially more inclusive term; able, that is, to comprehend within it a range of conceptions that need not necessarily refer either to a traditional notion of a messiah – indeed, the term “messianism” resonates too strongly in this context with the idea of a personal messiah – and to encompass different traditions of thought within it.²²

“Messianism,” moreover, particularly in the modern political context and particularly under the impact of Jacob Talmon’s work, has come to imply a specific type of political thought, style, and praxis that for the most part does not apply in the case of the history I am describing here. As David Ohana has characterized it, messianism “is essentially a belief in the perfection of man at the end of days, in a decisive and radical improvement that will take place in the condition of humanity, society and the world, in a final and complete resolution of history.”²³ While certain elements of this characterization can undoubtedly be readily identified in the visions and undertakings I discuss in the following chapters, Zionism in many respects aspired to what it conceived as a Jewish *return to* history rather than a retreat from, or supersession of it. It was far too historically conscious, I would argue, to see itself as part of an end-of-history or end-of-days

²² Compare Moshe Idel, “Multiple Forms of Redemption in Kabbalah and Hasidism,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101:1 (2011), 27–70. Idel writes with regard to medieval Jewish thought as well that, at times, “messianic” and “redemptive” ideas are not entirely identical and can be separated “such that redemption be understood, properly in my opinion, as not always involving a messianic type of redemption” (30). This is patently the case, I believe, when we are dealing with modern modes of thought, including (perhaps particularly) those that are to be found among Zionists.

²³ Ohana, *Political Theologies in the Holy Land*, 1.

project. As Chapter 4 of this book attempts to show, an understanding of history, indeed, a renarrating of history, was one important vehicle for the expression and longed-for implementation of Zionism's redemptive hopes. Although such expectations and visions, in other words, were at the very heart of the Zionist undertaking (as I am arguing here), and although much of Ohana's characterization would apply to the ways in which those visions were formulated, that acute historical consciousness and stress preserved a very this-worldly tenuousness – perhaps a historical pragmatism – as an integral part of them. If Yosef Gorny has argued that Zionism contained within it a powerful strain of what he calls “utopian realism,”²⁴ one might push this further and suggest that there was a component of redemptive realism that was similar and that lent great depth and weight to such visions of the future. This distinction is made clear, albeit in a specific context, by Avraham Shapira, who writes of the Zionist labor-mystic Aharon David Gordon that “when he raises the concept of ‘redemption,’ it is not with messianic connotations. Rather, he means a personal redemption through acts of mending [*tikkun*].”²⁵ It is hardly a leap at all to affix to Shapira's observation and to the distinction he makes the added component of *national* redemption which, after all, was no less present in Gordon's thought, alongside his further stress on the human and cosmic components.

Given this understanding of the meanings of “redemption” in the Zionist context, what I am interested in here is not precisely the question of “political messianism” as outlined by Jacob Talmon but rather the presence and effectiveness of redemptive ideas as motivating forces in shaping a political-cultural undertaking. Thus, my question is not directly about why Zionism did not go the way of movements that were animated by political-messianic tendencies and fall into what Talmon termed “totalitarian democracy”²⁶ (in this sense, my question is different from that asked by Anita Shapira in her article on the topic²⁷). That being said, I do suggest that the distinction made by Shapira, between a presence of

²⁴ See, for example, Yosef Gorny, *Anshei Kan ve-Achshav: Ha-Re'alism ha-Utopi shel Me'atzvei ha-Hevra ha-Yehudit ha-Hadasha be-Eretz Yisra'el* (The People of Here and Now: Utopian Realism of the Formative Figures of the New Jewish Society in Pre-State Israel) (Sde Boker: Ben-Gurion Research Institute, 2015).

²⁵ Avraham Shapira, *Or ha-Hayim be-Yom Ketanot: Mishnat A. D. Gordon u-Mekoroteiha ba-Kabbalah u-va-Hasidut* (The Kabbalistic and Hasidic Sources of A. D. Gordon's Thought) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996), 312.

²⁶ Jacob Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1952).

²⁷ Shapira, “Ha-Tzionut ve-ha-Meshihiut ha-Medinit.”

messianism in Zionist *thought* and a pragmatism that characterized Zionist *praxis*, is insufficient.

David Ohana has written of Jacob Talmon as a proponent of an anti-messianic liberalism, primarily (or at least in large measure) due to totalitarian messianism's proclivity to speak in the name of a "single truth" that finds (and must find) expression in politics.²⁸ It seems to me at least arguable that one reason Zionism did not slip down the path to totalitarianism had to do with visions of redemption and liberation that were fundamentally discursive and even argumentative to their very core; that the *endziel*, in other words, did not entail an entirely unitary society (although there were, to be sure, elements of a homogenizing tendency); that multivocality was, for the most part, a part of the vision itself. Adding paradoxical reinforcement to this tendency was the component of the Jewish messianic tradition that sees humanity in its entirety as one, often pushing its Zionist iteration toward a humanistic and universalistic orientation. This was modified by the multivocality that was both a *de facto* characteristic of Zionism from the outset and a part of its vision much of the time.²⁹

Given this inherent duality, Gorny's notion of "utopian realism" – a fusion, in other words, of these two seemingly opposed elements – seems to me more helpful than to posit a dichotomy between Zionist thought and action. Indeed, his phrase seems more instructive in another sense as well: Shapira writes that Theodor Herzl (and by implication, others like him) turned to Zionism after becoming disillusioned with the promise of progress that had seemed to be on offer by the Enlightenment and by European liberalism.³⁰ But while this was undoubtedly part of the story for many Zionists, she seems to disregard an additional and no less important element of the story: that despair with progress was never complete – either in Herzl or in virtually any other Zionist thinker. Rather, their turn to Zionism represented what was often a harsh critique of progress but at the same time constituted an argument about how the flaws of progress might be

²⁸ Ohana, *Political Theologies in the Holy Land*, 59.

²⁹ Compare Ohana, *Political Theologies in the Holy Land*, 60: "Talmon saw the Holocaust as the murderous crossroads of the historical encounter between Jewish Messianism and the 'bastard' Messianism embodied in Hitler. The Jews, the eternal people, represented for the Nazis the idea of the unity of all races and universal brotherhood. To kill them meant killing those who gave the world the universalistic commandment 'Thou shalt not kill.'"

³⁰ Shapira, "Ha-Tzionut ve-ha-Meshihiut ha-Medinit," 14. As a corollary to this, she lays great stress on the national-messianic component and diminishes the place of a universalist-redemptive dimension.