

THE SPIRITUAL REVIVAL

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The spiritual revival by Ahad ha-Am

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AHAD HA-AM

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REVIVAL**

The Spiritual Revival¹

(1902)

IT is not a mere accident that the question of Jewish culture has come to the front with the rise of "political" Zionism. Zionism—unqualified by any epithet—existed before, but it knew nothing of any problem of culture. It knew only its own plain and simple aim: that of placing the Hebrew nationality in new conditions, which should give it the possibility of developing all the various sides of its individuality. This being the aim of the earlier Zionists, the first article in their programme was naturally the creation of a fixed, independent centre for our nationality in our ancestral land. But at the same time they kept a watchful eye on every side of the life of the Hebrew nationality as it exists at present, and used every suitable means of strengthening it and promoting its development. A society of Zionists in Warsaw, for instance, was engaged at one and the same time in founding a colony in Palestine, a school of the modern type in Warsaw, and an association for the diffusion of Hebrew literature. That is to say, these men thought it their duty to combine "political" with "cultural" work; and all this in the name of Zionism (or Chibbath Zion, as it was then called). Nobody challenged this combination; nobody raised the question whether this "cultural" work was right or wrong, obligatory or permissible. It was understood on all sides that the conception of Zionism

¹[This essay was originally an address delivered before the general meeting of Russian Zionists at Minsk, in the summer of 1902. Only a part of it, that part which deals with the question of Jewish culture in its broader aspects, is here translated. The omitted portion is not of any considerable length.]

must include all that comes within the definition of Hebrew nationality. Any piece of work which would assist in strengthening and developing the nationality was Zionist work beyond all manner of doubt.

And now a new Zionism has arisen, and has adopted the term "political" as its descriptive epithet. What, we may inquire, is the precise point of this epithet? It adds nothing to the older Zionism, for Zionism has always been, in its hopes for the distant future, essentially "political." From its inception Zionism had at its very root the hope of attaining in Palestine, at some distant date, absolute independence in the conduct of the national life. That was a necessary condition of the unhindered and complete development of the national individuality. Now, even the newer Zionism cannot bring the Messiah "to-day or to-morrow"; hence it also is "political" only in its hopes for the future. Small wonder then that the epithet, which clearly added nothing, was often understood as taking something away. It was taken by political Zionists to mean something like this: The earlier Zionists included in Zionism everything germane to the development of the Hebrew national individuality; whereas for us it has only a political aim. Zionism for us means simply the foundation in Palestine, by means of diplomatic negotiations with Turkey and other powers, of a "safe refuge" for all oppressed and persecuted Jews, who cannot live under tolerable conditions in their native countries, and seek a means of escape from poverty and hunger. Even the Basle programme helped to fix this idea in people's minds, because in its first paragraph it defined the aim of Zionism thus: "To found in Palestine a safe refuge for the Jewish people," and made no mention of the *Jewish nationality*. The various speeches of Zionist leaders at Basle, in London, and elsewhere, which were a sort of commentary on this paragraph, stated emphatically and repeatedly that Zionism had come to solve once for all the economic and political problem of the Jews; that its aim was to gather all the oppressed of Israel into one place,

into the Jewish State, where they could live in security, and be no longer foreigners and aliens, whose struggle for existence excites the jealousy and ill-will of the native population. This is not the place to examine this form of Zionism with a view to discovering how far its promises as to the solution of the Jewish problem were capable of fulfilment in the natural course of events. I have dealt with this point on several occasions elsewhere. Here I only wish to point out that these promises had the effect of attracting attention mainly to the political aspect of Zionism, until the Zionist conception became narrowed down, and lost half its meaning.

Thus the "problem of culture" was a child of political Zionism. For centuries our people have suffered torments for the sake of the preservation of the products of their national spirit, seeing in these products the be-all and end-all of their existence. And now that they have at last come to recognise that suffering alone is not enough, but that it is necessary to work actively for the national revival—now, forsooth, it has become a "question," whether the strengthening of the national spirit and the development of the nation's spiritual products are essential parts of the work of the revival. And this question is answered by many in the negative!

But it must be added that this negative attitude, if we may trust those who adopt it, does not involve any opposition to "cultural" work as such. "Far be it from us," they say, "to deny the usefulness of such work. Though we do not regard it as Zionist work, we do not say that Zionists should not take it up. On the contrary, we actually encourage them to take part in cultural work so far as they can. But we do not wish to make it obligatory on them, because that would be mixing up Zionism with matters which are not essential to it, and have no necessary connection with its principles." Certainly it cannot be denied that many of these Zionists, who regard "culture" as something foreign to the conception of Zionism, do in fact take part in cultural work,

do in fact found schools and libraries, and in some cases even help in the diffusion of Hebrew literature and so forth. Nay, more: if you examine Zionist societies in various places, you will find that it is precisely such work that keeps them alive. Wherever a Zionist society really lives, its life is generally a result of cultural work, because such work can obtain a hold on the members, and give them the opportunity of devoted and persistent activity of a concrete nature, which has a visible usefulness. And, on the other hand, where a society is content to do no more for Zionism than sell "shekolim" and shares and hold "political" lectures, there you will generally notice a feeling of emptiness and the absence of a life-giving force; and in the end such a society pines and wastes away for lack of food, for lack, that is, of solid and constant work, which can rivet the attention, occupy the mind, and rouse the emotions and the will without intermission. All this is quite true. But to what conclusion does it drive us? Those who oppose "culture" conclude that there is no need to talk a great deal about "cultural work," or to argue and dispute about the purely theoretical question, whether such work is essentially bound up with the conception of Zionism, or not. This question, they say, is purely one of theory; in actual practice most Zionists do perform their share of this work to the best of their ability. But this conclusion is right only from the point of view of the interests of culture; it is not right from that of the interests of Zionism. It may be true that cultural work needs no express sanction from Zionism, so long as Zionism in its purely political form cannot provide its adherents with any other form of work which has greater attractions and a stronger hold. So long as that is the case, political Zionism is bound to rely on the help of cultural work, which is better able to satisfy the mind and provide an outlet for the energies of those who detest waste of time and idle talk. But if this sanction is not necessary to culture, it is most emphatically necessary to Zionism. Every true lover of Zionism must realise

the danger which it incurs through the diffusion of the idea that it has no concern with anything except diplomacy and financial transactions, and that all internal national work is a thing apart, which has no lot or portion in Zionism itself. If this idea gains general acceptance, it will end by bringing Zionism very low indeed. It will make Zionism an empty, meaningless phrase, a mere romance of diplomatic embassies, interviews with high personages, promises, *et hoc genus omne*. Such a romance appeals to the imagination; but it leaves no room for creative work, which alone can slake the thirst for activity.

When, therefore, we demand a clear and explicit statement that work for the revival of the national spirit and the development of its products is of the very essence of Zionism, and that Zionism is inconceivable without such work, we are not giving utterance to a mere empty formula, or fighting for a name. We are endeavouring to save the honour of Zionism, and to preserve it from that narrowness and decay which will be the inevitable, though undesired, result of the action of those leaders and champions of the movement who wish to confine it to the political aspect.

But before we attempt to make cultural work a part of the Zionist programme, we must distinguish between the two branches of that work. These two branches, though they differ in kind, have hitherto been confused, with the result that the question has become still further complicated.

The degree of culture to which a nation has attained may be estimated from two points of view: from that of the culture which it has produced, and from that of the state of its cultural life at any given time. In other words, "culture" has both an objective and a subjective meaning. Objectively, a nation's culture is something which has a reality of its own: it is the concrete expression of the best minds of the nation in every period of its existence. The nation expresses itself in certain definite forms, which remain for all time, and are no longer dependent on those who created

them, any more than a fallen apple is dependent on the tree from which it fell. For instance, we still have the benefit of Greek culture: we drink in the wisdom of Greek philosophers, and enjoy the poetry and the art which that great nation has left us, though the nation itself, which created all this culture, has vanished from the face of the earth. But the "state of the cultural life" of any nation is purely subjective and temporary: it means the degree to which culture is diffused among the individual members of the nation, and the extent to which its influence is visible in their private and public life. The "state of the cultural life" is thus essentially dependent on the individuals of whom it is predicated, and with them it passes and changes from one period to another.

Culture in the objective sense and culture in the subjective sense do not necessarily reach the same degree of development at the same time. There are periods in the history of a nation in which all its spiritual strength is concentrated in a few exceptionally gifted minds; and these produce an original culture of high value, which the generality of their countrymen (such is their "state of culture" at that particular time) cannot even fully understand. The England of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries affords an illustration. Shakespeare, Bacon, Locke, Hume, and the other great English writers of that period, a large body of men, relatively speaking, created new worlds in literature and philosophy, by the light of which men still walk at the present day. But the great mass of the English people was then in a low state of culture, which did not by any means correspond to the level reached by these giants. On the other hand, the intellectual forces of a nation in a particular period may find their expression in the general state of culture: education may be universal and the tone of life throughout enlightened and refined: while, at the same time, this culture may be barren, producing no master-minds able to express the spirit of the nation in original creative work, but dependent entirely on its own past, or on borrowings from other

nations. This is the condition, for instance, of the Swiss at the present day. They are all educated in excellent schools, which satisfy the highest demands of European enlightenment ; in many departments of the national life they show a high, and perhaps unequalled, level of culture. But from the point of view of *objective* culture Switzerland is unproductive : as yet there has arisen no great creative intellect, capable of embodying the Swiss spirit in an original national culture ; and even the best teachers in the Swiss universities have to be imported from abroad.

In dealing, therefore, with the question of spreading culture among the Jewish people, we must remember that there are two terms involved : on the one hand, the culture (in the objective sense) which we wish to spread ; on the other hand, the people in relation to that culture. Our task thus falls into two halves. We have in the first place to perfect the body of culture which the Jewish people has created in the past, and to stimulate its creative power to fresh expression ; and in the second place to raise the cultural level of the people in general, and to make its objective culture the subjective possession of each of its individual members. And in order to discover what we ought to do, and what we can do, in each of these two directions, we must clearly understand the position and the needs both of the culture and of the people.

I propose to deal in turn with each of the two halves into which I have divided the main question.

The existence of an original Hebrew culture needs no proof. So long as the Bible is extant, the creative power of the Jewish mind will remain undeniable. Even those who deny that the Jews are a people at the present day are compelled to admit that when they were a people they were a *creative* people, and the products of their creative power bear the indelible impress of their native genius. This being so, all those of us who believe, or rather *feel*, that the Jews are still a people, have the right to believe equally,