Like so many historic geniuses compressed into one-liners, the great Hebrew essayist Ahad Ha’am (Asher Ginzberg) has been canonized as the father of “spiritual” Zionism. This label reflects Ahad Ha’am’s focus upon the cultural and intellectual revival of the Jewish people, which he deemed an essential prerequisite for Jewish resettlement in the Land of Israel. But contrary to his image as a detached man of letters, Ahad Ha’am was also deeply concerned with the nuts and bolts of the Zionist project.

By ORR SCHARF
Born in 1856 to a Hasidic family in the Ukraine, Ginzberg was a Talmudic prodigy who left Orthodoxy, steeped himself in Western culture and became a highly influential figure in the pre-Herzlian Zionist movement. As the son of a well-to-do merchant, Ginzberg enjoyed economic security for a good part of his life. After the collapse of the family business, he worked as a manager for the Jewish-owned Wissotzky Tea company, for whom he relocated from Odessa to London in 1907. Only in his mid-sixties did Ahad Ha’am consummate his Zionist involvement, moving to Tel Aviv in 1922. His funeral five years later was attended by thousands.

Ginzberg was a prominent member of the Hovevei Zion (Lovers of Zion) group, which constituted the first organized attempt by modern Jews to act on their national aspirations. Officially launched in 1884 at a convention in the Prussian city of Katowice (today in Poland), Hovevei Zion engaged in fundraising, land acquisition and recruitment of prospective settlers willing to relocate to Ottoman-occupied Palestine. Alongside his administrative role at Hovevei Zion, Ginzberg earned his public reputation mostly as a controversial and outspoken polemicist, publisher and thinker, writing under the pen name Ahad Ha’am (“One of the People”). For many years, he was a shining star of the unique constellation of Jewish intellectuals who came to live in Odessa – a group that included the poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik and the historian Shimon Dubnow.

Ahad Ha’am dedicated his writing and much of his public activity to the revival of the Hebrew language. As founder and leader of the elitist, secretive Zionist faction, B’nei Moshe, he required that its members learn to speak and write in Hebrew. He was editor and publisher of several Hebrew-language journals and established both boys’ and girls’ schools in Eastern Europe and Palestine.

Spiritual Zionism, in practical terms, meant that the Land of Israel needed to become a center of Jewish renewal before it could house a viable Jewish polity. For Ahad Ha’am this solution was a realistic middle road between the ossified Judaism of Eastern Europe and the urgent political agenda of the charismatic Theodore Herzl, who published his proposal of a Jewish state in 1896 and a year later convened the first Zionist Congress in Basel. But as Herzl’s popularity rose among European Jewry, Ahad Ha’am’s declined.

For Ahad Ha’am, Spiritual Zionism was a realistic middle road between the ossified Judaism of Eastern Europe and the urgent political agenda of the charismatic Theodore Herzl.

In 1902, Herzl published his utopian novel Altneuland (Old-New Land), which marked the author’s most extensive display of his political vision. In the novel, the Jewish state is already in existence a mere two decades into the future, in 1923. Modeled after Herzl’s Viennese image of a liberal, German-speaking state, the Old-New Land is prosperous and pluralistic, peaceful and exuberant. The novel rekindled Ahad Ha’am’s chagrin at Herzl, which burst onto the pages of HaShiloah, the Hebrew monthly Ginzberg had founded in 1897. In a vituperative review, Ahad Ha’am tore Herzl’s vision to shreds, deriding it as “aping Euro-Christian culture.” He condemned as reckless the author’s setting of the story so soon into the future, thus stirring false hopes of imminent redemption among his readers. Ahad Ha’am concluded his diatribe by recommending a reference to another Zionist-utopian novel, A Journey to the Land of Israel in the Year 2040, published...
in Hebrew ten years earlier by one Elhanan Levinsky. That novel presented a vision that Ahad Ha’am found praiseworthy and agreeable: a Jewish state with a Hebrew culture, offering “a superior Zionist ideal of the Hebraic author over the German leader” – in other words, Herzl.

As it happened, that same superior “Hebraic” Levinsky, a friend of Ahad Ha’am’s and a member of B’nei Moshe, had a dozen years earlier accused Hovevei Zion of utopianism and detachment from reality. Published in October 1890 in the Hebrew newspaper Hamelitz, Levinsky’s essay “Eternal Life and Temporal Life” (“Hayei Olam ve’Hayei Sha’ah”) triggered a raucous quarrel of the quills. “The People of Israel need bread, they are hungry, thirsty, bare and tired,” Levinsky wrote, “and the Lovers of Zion [Hovevei Zion] tell them that in the future pastries to feed on and garments to wear will grow out of the soil of the Land of Israel – give us bread!” With bitter irony, Levinsky mocked the idea that “the select few among us who care for the greater good are . . . Hovevei Zion. Not the lovers of the nation at large, only the lovers of Zion.” Hovevei Zion may talk loftily about the need to change the course of history, he claimed, but “those who have lost their livelihood under the new [Czarist anti-Semitic] laws and whose children and infants are left without bread will not be consoled with history.”

In a vituperative review of Altneuland, Ahad Ha’am derided Herzl’s utopian vision as “aping Euro-Christian culture.”

As the polemic widened in the Hebrew press, Ahad Ha’am felt obligated to defend the position of Hovevei Zion. His rejoinder, aptly titled “Confusion of Opinions” (“Bilbul HaDe’ot”) appeared eight months later in Hamelitz, in July 1891. By that time Ahad Ha’am was embroiled in his first major political setback, following the publication earlier that year of his essay “Truth from the Land of Israel” (Emet Me’Eretz Yisrael.)

As member of the steering committee of Hovevei Zion, Ahad Ha’am had recently journeyed to Palestine to monitor firsthand the movement’s projects across the country. He

---

*All quotes from Emet Me’Eretz Yisrael are from Alan Dowty’s translation, published as “Much Ado about Little: Ahad Ha’am’s ‘Truth from Eretz Israel,’ Zionism and the Arabs,” in Israel Studies, Fall 2000.*
was dismayed but not surprised to find that
his concern over the premature enthusiasm
and deficient implementation of the settle-
ment of the Land of Israel was well-founded.
He began his essay with the disclaimer that
the Land’s “vitality has not waned” and that
it now “has the capacity to give life and happi-
ness to great numbers of its children.” How-
ever (he immediately continued), “I want to
reveal here a small part [of life in Palestine] –
the ugliest part.” Among his chief disappoint-
ments were the profiteering that plagued the
acquisition of lands and the Jewish colonies’
total financial dependence on Jewish phi-
lanthropists. Other faults included the pre-
dominant reliance on the winemaking indus-
try, which he deemed inefficient and morally
problematic, and the patronizing approach
to the indigenous Arab population, against
which he sternly cautioned. “From abroad we
are accustomed to believing that the Arabs
are all desert savages, like donkeys,” Ahad
Ha’am wrote. “But this is a big mistake. The
Arab, like all children of Shem, has a sharp
intellect and is very cunning.”

As a spiritual Zionist, Ahad Ha’am was ac-
customed to accusations of daydreaming, but
now he had to face the ire of his own allies over
his morose and acerbic criticism of Jewish pio-
neering in Palestine. Levinsky had written a
disgruntled response to the “Truth” essay, and
so had Menachem Ussishkin, a disciple of Ahad
Ha’am who had been a traveling companion in
Palestine and thus felt competent to counter
his mentor’s claims of the financial ineptitude
and shaky prospects of the settlements.

Ahad Ha’am’s “Confusion of Opinions” is
excerpted here in English translation for the
first time. Convinced that “Truth from the
Land of Israel” had been grossly misread, Ahad
Ha’am simply asserted that “Truth will remain
true,” and constructed his new essay as a reply
to “one of our finest writers,” namely Elhanan
Levinsky, author of “Eternal Life and Tempo-
ral Life.”

One of the chief misapprehensions, in
Ahad Ha’am’s eyes, was the accusation that he
was insensitive to the daily hardships faced
by the settlers. His opponents argued that his
“spiritual” concerns for the Jewish people as a
whole had blinded him to the personal plight
of Jews struggling to make ends meet, both in
Palestine and elsewhere. His expectation that
settlers in the Land of Israel should carry the
burden of national responsibility, while the
mundane question “what shall we eat” loomed
above their heads, attested – it was charged –
to his detachment and impracticality.

In “Confusion of Opinions,” Ahad Ha’am
employs Levinsky’s question “what shall we
eat” as a rhetorical device to evince his sen-
sitivity to the settlers’ daily reality. He is at
pains to show that he was not placing inhu-
mane and unrealistic demands on the set-
tlers. On the contrary, he believed that the
well-being of the settlers of the Land of Israel
should be the concern of the entire nation,
while “the misfortunes of the individual” of
Diaspora Jews were a private matter, or the
concern of their local community at best.

More than a century has passed since the
tempestuous struggles over the nature of the
fledgling Zionist movement. Although the
settlement efforts of Hovevei Zion has been
duly inscribed in official Israeli memory as
the epitome of Zionist pioneering, the names
of its leaders, activists and thinkers collect
soot and dust on street signs and plaques.
The polemics of Ahad Ha’am and his con-
temporaries have largely been forgotten, but
reading them today, one finds that time has
not blunted their edge. If anything, the es-
tablishment of the State of Israel has only
sharpened some of the dilemmas they raise.

In the 21st century, passionate Zionist
polemics find colorful expression on the
Knesset floor and on boisterous Hebrew talk
shows. The manifold structures of Israel-
Diaspora relations recycle and refine the dis-
course of vision and philanthropy debated by
Ahad Ha’am and his critics. And it’s still not
clear, after all these years, how to differenti-
ate reliably between daydreamers and real-
ists, opinion-makers and genuine leaders.
Confusion of Opinions

Eight months ago, when one of our finest writers publicly mourned that at such dour times, as our woes increase and the state of our brethren is dire, Hovevei Zion are focusing all their efforts “within the narrow confines of the soil of the Land of Israel” and to all questions they retort: Love Zion!, while failing to notice that “only one percent of a hundred of the host of the House of Israel leave to settle in the Land of Israel while 99 percent remain here.” I said [in “Truth from the Land of Israel!”] that the author erred by confusing two notions: that of the nation of Israel and that of the people of Israel; the
needs of the whole nation that are indeed shared by all of its members and the needs of the whole nation that are the needs of many private individuals, each unto himself. Had he [i.e. Levinsky] distinguished between these notions adequately, he would have understood that Hovevei Zion, whose overall goal is only to promote the greater good, consists of private individuals when it comes to filling their personal needs, like all other individual members of the public. For this one percent out of the hundred is what we seek, considering it to be the answer to the question of the whole nation’s existence, setting aside the 99 percent of the masses of the House of Israel, that is, a host of many individuals, who will remain here [in the Diaspora]. The circumference of the circle consists of a great many dots, but only the one dot at its center is the soul that enlivens all the others. We lament the misfortune of thousands of Jews who are losing their war for personal survival; but to them we say: Do not love Zion, because the love of Zion has nothing to do with the misfortunes of the individual. Only to those who love their people wholeheartedly and seek answer to the question of its existence at large – to them we say: Love Zion . . .

The circumference of the circle consists of a great many dots, but only the one dot at its center is the soul that enlivens all the others.

If we all see the settlement of the Land of Israel as the answer to “the question of the existence of the whole nation,” we must all confess that there is a vast difference between departure for the Land of Israel and departure for all other countries. When an Israelite leaves to earn his bread in another land, he does so “at his own peril.” If he finds there that which he sought – good for him. And if not, then one more person has joined the paupers of that country, becoming a burden upon its people or the Jews resident there, without becoming a liability for the Jewish people as a whole. The same applies if he behaves improperly there, employs despi-
cable means to earn his living, etc.; he is sin-
ning against that country and the Jews who
live there, who may have to pay the price for
his transgressions. But to the Jewish people
as a whole he has done nothing, and it’s all
the same to us if the pauper or criminal lives
in the north or south, or if he is supported
by his brethren in this country or that one.
Therefore, the whole nation is not obligated
to prevent anyone from putting himself at
risk and going wherever his mood carries
him, to seek happiness or wealth and fulfill
his heart’s desire. This does not apply in the
Land of Israel. There we find that “the one
percent of a hundred” is not a self-sufficient
being, but one stone, large or small, in the
foundation of an entire building, which will
have consequences for the existence of the
entire nation, its ultimate happiness and
dignity. And since the entire future of this
building depends upon the nature and form
of its foundation, and each and every of its
stones affects the good of the entire people,
the whole nation must take care that the
materials are solid and that the plan is ade-
quate and corresponds with the greater
purpose of the building . . .

This is what I meant in my essay [“Truth
from the Land of Israel”], when I said that the
“settlement of the Land of Israel is not an an-
swer to the question ‘What shall we eat?’ for
each and every individual, but rather to the
question of the life of the whole nation,” and
only a naïve or disingenuous person might in-
terpret these simple words as though I meant
that each and every individual who arrives in
the Land of Israel must concern himself with
nothing but the greater good of the whole na-
tion and is barred from thinking whatsoever
about “What shall we eat!” It is not the lumber
and stones that concern themselves with the
future of the building, but the builders who do
their best to choose good and sturdy materi-
als, to lay each component in its right place,
in which case the building will naturally be
strong and beautiful. Thus it was not from the
settlers that I demanded that they go settle
solely for the nation’s greater good, but I de-
manded from the leaders that they establish
a system that would attract the worthy and
repel the unworthy (distinguishing worthy
from unworthy by the degree of physical and
moral stamina and their love of labor and
peace and austerity). From the writers and
preachers I demanded that they understand
what they are doing and not collect useless
building materials by fabricating good news
and making shoddy proposals. From the men
of action, who take part in the construction,
I demanded that they not aggrandize them-
selves and not ruin the whole building by act-
ing rashly on their own; and I certainly did not
address my words to the unfortunate masses
who seek an answer to the question of bread –
they are rushing to flee, driven by hunger, and
it is foolish to believe that words have the pow-
er to stop them – but rather to the nation and
its leaders, its writers and thinkers wherever
they may be, who steer these people toward
the Land of Israel and try to amass a great
pile of stones, not discriminating whole from
broken, without order and unity and without
a well-defined vision . . .

But it is not my main goal here to show
my critics that they have misread the words
they are responding to; it is another, more
surprising and saddening matter that I wish
to address. As I said above, that from all the
words of my detractors, from the long-winded
complaints about “the trials and tribulations”
they invoke in order to prove to me that this is
not the right time to indulge in “philosophy”
– I can see that the movement of Hovevei Zion
grows increasingly absorbed in the question
of emigration [for the Land of Israel], not only
in deeds, but also in 
thoughts. For Hovevei Zion
are soon to turn into ordinary philanthro-
pists, who seek nothing but a palliative rem-
edy for the illness of the hour, without any
concern for tomorrow. . . Our bad experiences
have hardened the hearts and confused the
minds, for we tend to forget about the whole
because of the details, forget the “eternal life”
due to our “temporal life,” and soon enough
we will stop “philosophizing,” that is, stop seeing the movement of *hibbat Zion* (“the love of Zion,”) as “a complete and lasting answer to the Jewish question,” and we will become one more “association” among the other righteous associations whose sole purpose is to bring a portion of the paupers of our people to a place that is safe, *at the current moment*, only that we give priority in this matter to the Land of Israel, because there we have a beautiful “past,” precious tombs. . .

However, if this is indeed so, then the question that was asked eight months ago resurfaces: if *hibbat Zion* is also but a partial answer to the greater question of emigration, how can we justify making it the foremost question, the watchword of national Judaism, if only one in a hundred goes to settle in the Land of Israel? And if our current woes are sufficient reason for us to rid our minds of concern about the days to come, and disturb our *careful and lucid* work toward a greater cause in the distant future, then – I keep asking – can we justifiably complain about our ancestors for failing, during the long years of exile, to lay in the Land of Israel the cornerstone for the happiness of posterity? Were their woes truly smaller than our own? And yet, we often hear such disdain from *Hovevei Zion*.

Regrettably, it seems that if I said in my essay there is “no system and no order and no unity in our actions,” – I only said *half* of it, and to complete the picture, we must further add, that there is no system and no order and no unity in our *opinions* as well, and wherever we turn we see only confusion – the confusion of actions and the confusion of opinions.

London, 2 Av 5691 (1891)