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The Robert S. Wistrich Memorial Lecture 2016

Prof. David Ohana, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel:

Robert S. Wistrich's Zionist Legacy

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On the 6th February 1923, Albert Einstein – shortly after receiving the Nobel Prize for Physics and when he was at the peak of his fame – gave the first scientific address ever to be delivered at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In an impassioned speech that testified to his Zionist credo, he declared:

“I consider this the greatest day of my life. (...) This is a great age, the age of the liberation of the Jewish soul. And it has been accomplished through the Zionist movement, which has remained a spiritual movement, so that no one in the world will be able to destroy it.”

During his intellectual and public life, Robert Wistrich maintained the motto suggested in Einstein's speech. This essence of Zionism was central to Wistrich's research, but also to his way of life in his maturity and his ideological outlook.

In which way was his personal outlook reflected in his academic work? How did he arrive at his Zionist outlook and his study of Zionism?

Before he came to Israel, he wrote his doctoral thesis (in English) on the attitude of the political left to the Jews in the nineteenth century. He said that

“For my part, I never believed that scholars are without feelings and that a choice a man makes in the academic field is unconnected with his personal life.”

Wistrich grew up and was educated in England in the nineteen-fifties, sixties and seventies. He claimed to have experienced

“antisemitism, but of a mild kind, not harsh or violent, but not beneath the surface either ... “

He said that he researched

“the various anti-Zionist ideas of the Orthodox, the socialists, the communists, the Bund. When you read the things they said and wrote before the founding of the State, most of their arguments against setting up a Jewish state were convincing.”

Wistrich, at the beginning of his intellectual and academic development, was a kind of cosmopolitan Jew, a radical youth who dealt with the problems of the world rather than the misfortunes of his people:

“I too in the nineteen-sixties passed through a stage of radicalism in my life. From about 1964, when I began to study for my BA, I felt the Zeitgeist: the fight against institutions, and at the same time a belief in various utopias. Today, it is hard for me to understand how they thought that the cultural revolution in China was an ideal and did not realise that it was an atrocity. When I got to Cambridge, I for the first time encountered the elite of British society. They regarded the Jews as ‘not out sort of people’.”

But in the last decade, he felt a dramatic change in the attitude to anything to do with the Jews, “*and first and foremost with regard to the State of Israel and Zionism.*”

In 1968 when he returned to Europe from Stanford in California, he heard of the student revolt that had broken out in France.

“Immediately, with the reflex of a nomadic revolutionary, I went to Paris. I half stood aside and watched the disturbances and half joined them myself.”

In that same year, he went to Dubcek's Prague where they attempted a “socialism with a human face,” and then the Russian tanks came in.

“By the end of 1968 I realised that all the dreams of the student revolt were no more than dreams. I decided to go to Israel for a year. I felt Jewish, I felt I had a Jewish identity. It wasn't because I was a great Zionist.”

He was then twenty-three years old and was appointed editor of *New Outlook*, the English- language journal of *Mapam*, the socialist party in Israel. This was his first encounter with Zionist socialism. He studied at the Hebrew University under professors such as Jacob Talmon and Yehoshua Arieli and returned to England for a decade to finish his doctorate.

“I was away from Israel for ten years but I knew I would return. But it was not because I was a Zionist; it was something emotional. I had a deep inner conviction that the State of Israel was the future of the Jewish people. Either you want to take part in it or you observe it from outside. I didn't want to live in exile.”

In one of his first academic papers, published in 1977, *Zionism: revolt against historic destiny*, Wistrich mentioned that Alexis de Tocqueville, the great historian, said that the French Revolution had two very distinct phases -- the first which sought the abolition of everything in the past; and the second which tried to reconnect with that same past from which the French had cut

themselves off. In the case of Zionism, its basic tasks and objectives were not simply to destroy a given socio-political structure, or even to achieve national independence after an interval of two thousand years.

The Zionist revolution derived most of its peculiar features from the fact that it was a revolt against historic destiny itself, or as David Ben-Gurion, the founding father of the State of Israel, once put it, “*against the unique destiny of a unique people*”.

The messianic link to Zion and the emotional fervour which it generated, enabled the Jewish national movement to reawaken dormant energies in Jewish life which it transferred from the religious to the socio-political sphere. But this transference necessarily involved a revolt against Jewish tradition if only because it took many of its ideals from liberal and progressive trends in the non-Jewish world. The secular messianism of marginal, assimilated Jewish intellectuals like Moses Hess, Bernard Lazare and Theodor Herzl reflected their subjective consciousness of a “Jewish problem”.

Nachman Syrkin, the first theoretician of labour Zionism, did not overlook the messianic implications of the new ideology for the Jewish people. “The messianic hope, which was always the greatest dream of exiled Jewry” would, he predicted, “be transformed into political action”, by fusing socialism with Zionism in a Jewish State. Ber Borochov, the leading theorist of Marxist Zionism, also saw the goal of a Jewish State essentially as a means to an end - in this case to facilitate the class-struggle of the Jewish proletariat.

Neither Syrkin nor Borochov, Wistrich pointed out, went to live in Palestine, unlike Aharon David Gordon, the secular mystic and patron-saint of the early Palestinian Jewish labour movement. His “religion of labour”

with its revolt against the parasitic economy of the ghetto strongly influenced the settlers of the *Second Aliyah*, They shared his belief that only manual labour could create a Jewish national revival in Palestine, based on sacrifice, physical effort and a life dose to nature.

The pioneers of the Second Aliyah had carried the social-revolutionary ideas nurtured in their Russian environment into what was then a decaying backwater of the Ottoman Empire, where there was no industrial base, urban working-class or capitalist bourgeoisie. Everything had to be built from the beginning – the land, the people, the new society. Their opposition to the colonial pattern of exploitation exemplified by the philanthropic paternalism of the settlements run by agents of Baron Edmond de Rothschild, is eloquent testimony to this social-revolutionary ethos of early Zionism. They understood that the colonialist social norms which were crystallising in the old *yishuv* would undermine their national ideal of regeneration.

The ideology of early Zionism never considered a total rejection of the old world. Berl Katznelson, an outstanding trade union organiser and one of the most representative figures of the Palestinian Jewish labour movement, recognized that Zionism was a “revolt against servility within the revolution”.

The significance of the Zionist Revolution, said Wistrich, did not lie so much the birth of a new nation as a result of the heroic Israeli War of Independence, as in its efforts to normalize the condition and status of the Jews as a people. This either-or attitude was also reflected in a different way in the Israel-centred Zionist rejection of the Diaspora. For a time it really seemed as if the gulf between Israeli and Jew would grow wider, that there was no common identity. Had this happened, Zionism would have succeeded in its most revolutionary aim - to become part of the general history of modern man by

breaking out of what it regarded in purely negative terms as the powerless situation of the *Galut* Jew (Jews living in exile). In that case Zionism might well have produced a new nation of Hebrew-speaking Gentiles, a State in which Israelization (understood as a form of collective assimilation) would inevitably undermine the Jewish heritage. I will return later to this risk of Hebraization or Canaanisation of the Jewish State, but another danger lay at the door.

The Zionist movement from its inception regarded assimilation as one of its central enemies, as a morally degrading position for any self-respecting Jew to adopt. Like other national movements, it tended to decry assimilation as an expression of weakness of character rather than to perceive it as a historic process with its own logic and momentum. Thus, Zionists all-too-easily overdramatized the “spiritual slavery” of the assimilationists. They produced a mythical image of Western Jewry in particular, that bore little relation to the realities of Jewish existence in the more open, pluralistic societies of the West. “Assimilationists” found themselves branded as self-hating Jews or traitors to their people even when they were no longer religious, had little knowledge or connection with Jewish tradition and their self-definition as part of the Jewish people made little sense in the general context of liberal, 19th-century European society. It was moreover frequently forgotten by Zionist critics of assimilation that without emancipation and exposure to the values of European culture the revival of national consciousness among Jews might never have taken place. The classical Zionist analysis also ignored the fact that much of what it called assimilation was in reality acculturation – the adoption of the cultural values of the general society by a minority group.

Writing in 1906, the President of the Jewish Theological Seminary in America and one of the founders of Conservative Judaism, Solomon

Schechter, declared, for example, that Zionism in his eyes was the great bulwark against assimilation. Assimilation meant to him, as it did to most Zionists at the turn of the century, a loss of identity, a process of self-dissolution. He said “that Judaism means to preserve its life by *not* losing its life.”

The struggle against assimilation was undoubtedly a central myth in the emergence of Zionism and has continued to be one of its major preoccupations. Already in *Rome and Jerusalem*, the work of a German Communist who had once shared Marx's views on Jews and Judaism, the pattern is clear. Self-abnegation is not only morally distasteful but it will not work. This was of course Moses Hess, the first assimilated Jew to turn to Zionism, who wrote “*every Jew is, whether he wishes it or not, bound unbreakably to the entire nation.*”

Peretz Smolenskin, the Russian-Jewish nationalist, writing at the end of the 1870s, also believed in this unbreakable bond and was equally scathing about efforts by the Berlin *Haskalah* and the German-Jewish Reform to denationalize Jewry. The young Nathan Birnbaum, founder of Zionism in the Austrian Empire, described the “*mania of assimilation*” as “*national suicide*”. None of these early Zionist thinkers made, according to Wistrich, a clear-cut distinction between what is generally regarded today as *acculturation* (i.e. the adoption by Jews of external characteristics of the majority culture such as language, dress, manners, etc.) and assimilation – understood as embracing the national identity of the dominant majority group. They considered assimilation as a vain attempt to bring Jewish history to an end. By desiring the complete abandonment of Jewish identity, the “assimilationists” were betraying the assumed core-value of Jewish history – the imperative of group survival.

Zionism, as A.D. Gordon declared, was the answer to this assimilation: Only in *Eretz Israel*, planted in the natural soil and drawing on vital sources from the past, could this ethnic self escape from the constrictions and the sterility of the *Galut*. The vital force of Jewish national creativity would only reassert itself through renewed contact with the land and through physical labour, enabling a regenerated Jewish people to eventually arise.

All the leading Zionist thinkers vigorously opposed assimilation just as they negated the *Galut* as a source of spiritual, material and political dependence. Insofar as Zionism defined itself as a Jewish national renaissance, as a movement of auto- emancipation and a revolutionary transformation of the Jewish destiny it was virtually obliged to adopt such an uncompromising stance.

Zionism was met with hostility not only from the assimilationist movement, the internal threat, but it also faced hostility and hatred from outside. The widespread libel that Zionism is a “racist” ideology sounds, indeed, like a modern version of original sin. It taints those who support a Jewish homeland in Israel with the stigma of “crimes against humanity.” In the view of many of those condemning Zionism, colonialist Jews from Europe brutally displaced a native Palestinian population, supposedly basing themselves on a racist outlook imported from the West. The desire of Israel to be a “Jewish” state is seen as essentially racist, because the Jewish people are viewed as a religious group rather than as a nation. In practical terms, the Law of Return is attacked as being particularly “racist,” since it grants Jews from the Diaspora the rights of Israeli citizenship denied to exiled Palestinians.

In striking contrast to the prevailing myths, Zionism showed remarkable indifference to race as a factor in shaping the character and ethos of Israeli

society. In contrast to white colonizing societies like South Africa, Australia, the United States or Rhodesia in the past, colour was never of importance in Israel as an indicator of social status. Nor was there any need to use “race” as a legitimizing ideology to exploit native Arab labour. As for the future, Robert said, negotiations will determine the political solution, not discrimination or terror. Unlike the South Africans and white Rhodesians under apartheid or the French colons in Algeria, Israelis since 1948 have been a *majority*, not a minority in their own state.

Any honest analysis of Zionist ideology will quickly reveal that there is no racism in its mainstream. From Herzl to Jabotinsky, from Weizmann to Ben-Gurion and Berl Kaznelson, there is virtually no hint of racial superiority, no desire to dominate or enslave other peoples, no recourse to mythical-biological explanations of history, society or culture. As one of the last of the national-liberation movements to emerge in late 19th-century Europe, mainstream Zionism combined the humanist and universalist patriotism of the French Revolution with the messianic Jewish tradition of a return to Zion.

Unlike most national movements which arose among people already living in their own land, Zionism was in its origins a movement in search of a territory. It had to resolve a unique problem, the *homelessness* of the Jewish people an extraterritorial minority which had lost its sovereignty over Palestine nearly 1900 years earlier and lacked any independent structure of *political* authority. The disastrous plight of the Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe in the last quarter of the 19th century – an almost defenceless population reeling from pogroms and discrimination – created an increasingly acute “Jewish problem” which required a political solution. In absorbing Jews from the Arab world, the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and

many other countries, Israel was able to fulfil one of the main goals for which it was established. This was made possible by the Law of Return, which has counterparts around the world from Germany to Greece and Armenia.

Indeed, if the Palestinians finally establish a state of their own, one can be sure that they will also enact a Law of Return to gather in scattered Palestinians from their own Diaspora. No one is going to accuse them of “racism” for giving priority to Arab Palestinians.

The Israeli Law of Return provided a secure haven for the Jewish victims of Nazi persecution and other forms of oppression. The Jew who returns to Israel and acquires citizenship is exercising a natural human right to choose his or her destiny, without being under compulsion or being condemned, like his forefathers, to wander as a stranger from one exile to another.

The typical *halutzim* were young middle-class Jews who in going to Palestine turned their backs both on the Diaspora and on bourgeois society. They were seeking personal and communal redemption by becoming workers or peasants. This was closer to the ideals espoused by the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy than to the notions of Western colonialists. Of course, not all Zionists shared this utopian socialist vision. Nevertheless, a common denominator of Zionist ideology was the need to create a healthy economic and political structure for the regeneration of the Jewish people in Palestine.

In the early 1990's I gave a seminar on “Myth and Memory in Zionism and Israel” at the Jerusalem Van Leer Institute. I asked Robert to join me and edit a collection of academic essays on the seminar, and the result was two books, edited by us: “*Myth and Memory*” and “*The Shaping of Israeli Identity*”. In these books we discussed the post-Zionist climate, a debate

which is no less about history per se. The focus was not, however, on the Jewish-Arab conflict, but was concentrated much more on those internal Jewish factors which have shaped the Israeli collective consciousness and national-cultural identity in the past 100 years, in all their pluralism, ambivalence and contradictions. Naturally, these myths, memories and traumas that have shaped the Israeli identity did not develop in a vacuum nor as the pure product of internal developments within 20th century Jewish history.

Even without the devastating blow of the Holocaust and the conflict with the Arab-Muslim world that confronted the new Israeli state, the challenge of constructing a viable Israel would have been formidable, To convert an urban-based Diasporic people whose cohesion had already been significantly eroded by cultural assimilation into a “normal” nation rooted in its own land and the Hebrew language, was a huge task even under the most optimal set of circumstances.

The ideological synthesis of socialist Zionism and the driving myths that shaped Israeli society in its early years reflected many of these imperatives, constraints and challenges. The emphasis on *mamlakhtiut* (“statism”), on national security, rootedness, and the pioneering ethos as well as the priority attached to a “melting pot” ideology, seemed appropriate to the immediate imperatives of survival under adverse conditions.

Similarly, the “heroic” Spartan ethos, so decried by current fashion, was in many respects a functional necessity for a country poor in natural resources, surrounded by enemies and dependent on a high level of motivation, collective willpower and an implacable determination to re-root itself in the land. The dominant myths underwent a subtle shift after 1967 as territorial

expansion and rule over a large Palestinian population created a new set of problems and dilemmas. The future of the occupied territories, questions of borders and ultimate national goals, the globalizing of the Arab- Israeli conflict and a changed relation with the Diaspora, became contentious and central issues in Israeli politics.

Israeli society was becoming increasingly westernized – more materialistic, individualist and consumer-orientated. In this deideologized Zionism, there was far greater scope for a plurality of identities, for recognizing the validity of the private realm and the needs of the individual. A flourishing Hebrew-language culture and literary experimentation encouraged a new freedom in addressing time-honoured ideals and deflating established myths.

The era of grand ideological syntheses appeared to be over and increasingly calls for “normalization” could be heard that reflected a palpable war-weariness and a longing for “peace now.” The Palestinian question could no longer be swept under the carpet and increasingly impinged on the Israeli collective psyche as a problem that directly affected the identity of the Israeli people and its state.

The image of the Holocaust as the nadir of Jewish powerlessness in *Galut* (exile) and the stigma attached to it, gave way to an increasingly strong symbolic identification with this traumatic memory. The traditional Zionist contrast between tough, resourceful Israelis who make their own history and the passive Diaspora Jews who went like “lambs to the slaughter” has been steadily muted. There is much less need today to dramatize the rupture with the Diasporic past, to create a counter-model to the exilic Jew. In its place has come a more realistic and humane approach to suffering, less eagerness to embrace death in the heroic mould and a much greater interest of Israelis in their own personal and collective roots, which lie after all in Diaspora

traditions.

The two thousand years of Jewish exile in the Diaspora are no longer perceived as a potential threat to the viability of Israeli statehood, but as an integral part of Israel's past, to be integrated into its contemporary history. An Israeli identity, divorced from its Jewish sources, therefore seems increasingly unlikely despite the tension that still exists between the Zionist aspiration and the reality of the Diaspora. Such tensions and difficulties are probably inevitable in the building of a sovereign society and in their own way are the imperfect outcome of the very successes of Zionism in accomplishing many of its original aims. On the eve of the Holocaust, the Jews of Palestine represented a mere 3 per cent of world Jewry. Currently, the Jews in Israel are over half of world Jewry.

Robert mentions in his writings the Canaanite group. The Canaanites were Israelis in the 1950s who called for separation between Israelis and Jews. They wanted a healthy, vigorous, non-religious culture based on "Hebrew" identity and severed from foreign Diaspora roots. They denied any common ground between Israel and the Diaspora Jews.

But the Canaanites were not only a tiny group that appeared on the stage of Israeli history but a narrative and ideology that continues to accompany the Israeli identity. The Israelis, according to the Canaanite narrative, are from this place and belong only here; but according to the crusader narrative, the Israelis are from another place and belong there.

On the one hand, the mythological construction of Zionism as a modern crusade describes Israel as a western colonial enterprise planted in the heart of the East and alien to the area, its logic, and its peoples, whose end must be degeneration and defeat. On the other hand, the construction of the State

of Israel as neo-Canaanism, which defines the nation in purely geographical terms as an imagined native community, demands breaking away from the chain of historical continuity. Those are the two greatest anxieties that Zionism and Israel has had to encounter and answer forcefully.

To use Max Weber's expression, Robert Wistrich was an “ideal type” of the historian as intellectual and the intellectual as historian. This symbiosis was prominent in both his academic work and in his public and private life. His eminence as an historian of international renown who researched the Zionist movement from the end of the nineteenth century was due to his passion for defending the Jewish people and the State of Israel which had always been subject to opposition and hostility.

His stature as an intellectual derived from his historical knowledge shown in the more than thirty books he wrote and edited and the more than four hundred articles he published in academic journals, reflecting his mastery of eleven languages.

But an historian-intellectual like Wistrich could not have gained his international reputation, his academic achievements and the across-the-board recognition of his contribution to scholarship without his particular biography which in many respects is a case-study of the possible horizons of Zionism.

For me, Robert was my big brother ever since I met him in the nineteen-eighties at the university on Mount Scopus. It was impossible not to be impressed by him: by his tall stature, his smile, his Cambridge English, the vast historical knowledge he brought with him from overseas, his elegant style of writing, and especially his wisdom, the patience with which he lectured and his limitless readiness to help colleagues and students.

But what was most outstanding was his love of the Jewish people, his passion for Zionism and his loyalty to the State of Israel. Because he was not born in Israel, the existence of the state was not self-evident to him, and he therefore made himself the best-known representative in the world of the fight against antisemitism. Parallel with this, unlike most native Israelis, Robert appreciated the historical miracle of the “return to history,” as Gershom Scholem called it: Israel's incredible achievement in becoming the homeland of half the Jewish people, and the ability of the Jews after two millennia to take responsibility for their destiny by creating their national home.

Thank you for your attention.

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