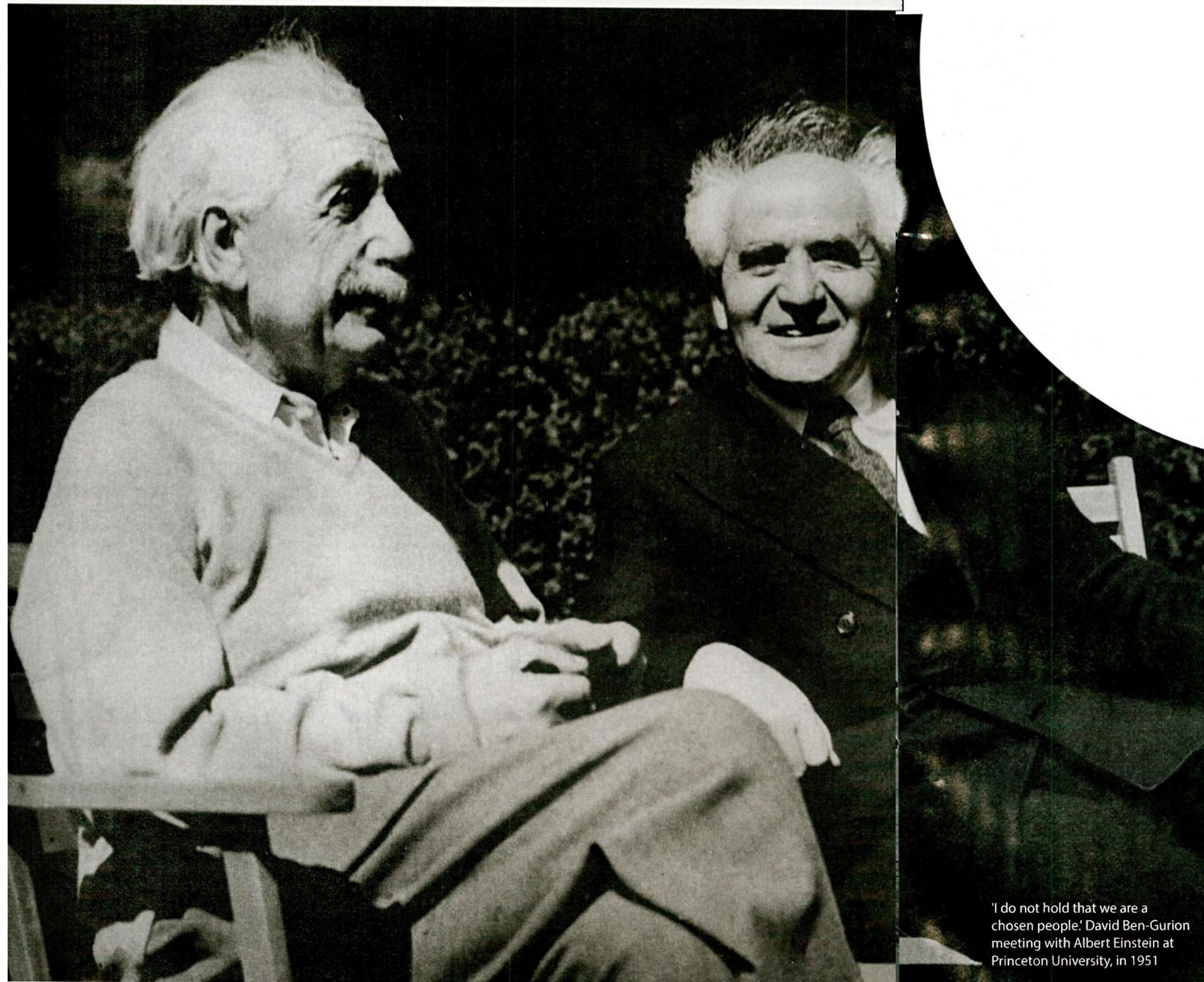


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## Jewish World



'I do not hold that we are a chosen people.' David Ben-Gurion meeting with Albert Einstein at Princeton University, in 1951

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# GENIUS:

## Spiritual Zionism's great opportunity

With the Diaspora shrinking, Judaism splintering, and antisemitism resurging, the Zionist vision that challenged Herzl's can return as the Jewish nation's new glue

**By Amotz Asa-El**

**HAVING LEARNED** of the young plan "to gather the Jews of the world together in Palestine, with a government of their own," Mark Twain cautioned the Ottoman Empire to resist the scheme. The Jews have "the cunningest brains in the world," the great novelist wrote in Harper's magazine. It followed, therefore, that if allowed to inhabit one free country "that race will find out its strength," and "if the horses know theirs, we should not ride anymore."

The "brains" to which Twain alluded have long been a fixture of Jewish stereotype and reality, intriguing scholars, thinkers, and ideologues, both Jewish and Gentile. "Israel passes over Europe like the sun," wrote German sociologist (and future Nazi) Werner Sombart in 1911 with a mixture of admiration and fear, "at its coming, new life bursts forth; at its going, all falls into decay."

There were two dimensions to Jewish excellence over the centuries: the mythical and the actual. Mythically, the Jews were inspired – and their enemies were frustrated – by the biblical statements that Israel is "God's treasured possession among all the people" (Exodus 19:5), one destined to be "a light unto nations" (Isaiah 42:6). One famous rabbi, Judah Loew (better known as the Maharal of Prague, d. 1609), took this heritage so literally that he claimed Jewish distinction was biological, that the Jews were the only nation "mentally prepared" to breed prophets, "just like the human race is superior to the rest of all living things."

Such thinking was dismissed outright by modern Jews, from Benedict Spinoza, who thought "there is absolutely nothing that the Jews can arrogate to themselves beyond other people," to David Ben-Gurion, who in a speech at Brandeis University in 1960

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said, "I do not hold that we are a chosen people."

Even some premodern Jews refused to see the Jews as a superior nation. "The entire human race is treasured," wrote Italian exegete Ovadiah Sforno (1475-1550). The Jews' distinction, he wrote, was not in their character but in their assignment, which was to form God's "kingdom of priests" and "to teach the entire human race to call in God's name."

While admirably sober and humble, such insights ignore what Twain and Sombart detected, and what will seal this journey to the future of the Jews: Jewish genius.

**SCHOLARS LIKE** Spinoza and Sforno lived before the Jews' admission to general society, and therefore never saw the eruption of Jewish excellence in academia, politics, industry and the arts. Now, hardly two centuries since the ghetto walls collapsed, the liberated Jew's distinction has become so glaring that – unlike the belief that the Jews are chosen – it is impossible to deny.

Intellectually, the Jewish nation produced major thinkers such as Spinoza, Karl Marx, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Isaiah Berlin, groundbreaking scientists like Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Niels Bohr, and Jonas Salk, and major literati from Henri Bergson, Boris Pasternak, and Joseph Brodsky to Saul Bellow, Harold Pinter and Philip Roth.

Commercially, Jews had built by the 1920s most of the world's greatest department stores, from New York's Gimbels, Bloomingdale's, and Alexander's through Boston's Filene's and London's Marks and Spencer to Berlin's Herman Tietz and Nathan Israel, not to mention Wertheim, whose central store on Leipziger Platz featured 83 elevators under a glass-roofed atrium that

landmarked prewar Berlin's commercial heart.

At the same time, thousands of unsung Jews were excelling scholastically, so much so that by the 1920s 15 percent of the former Prussia's physicians and 46 percent of Hungary's were Jews, and the following decade half of New York's doctors and two-thirds of its lawyers were Jews.

## Jewish ambition, curiosity and resourcefulness were fostered outside their land, by the political insecurity, geographic mobility, and cultural interactions that life in the Diaspora often entailed

Politically, hardly several generations after their forebears won the right to vote, Jews emerged as leaders of Britain, France, Italy, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, and Austria, in addition to producing history-shaping statesmen like Benjamin Disraeli and Henry Kissinger, as well as major revolutionaries like Leon Trotsky, Rudolf Slansky, Ana Pauker, Bela Kun, and Daniel Cohn-Bendit.

Today, one-tenth of the US senate, one third of the American Supreme Court, and a quarter of the top billionaires in the US are Jews, as are the incumbent Secretary

of Treasury Steven Mnuchin and his recent predecessors Jack Lew, Larry Summers and Robert Rubin, as well as the current Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen and her predecessors Ben Bernanke and Alan Greenspan, and also the leading candidates for her succession, Stanley Fischer and Gary Cohn.

Culturally, meanwhile, Jews like Sam Goldwyn (born Shmuel Gelbfish to an impoverished family in Warsaw), Louis Mayer (born Lazar Meir in the Ukraine), the Warner Brothers (born Hirsh, Aaron, Shmuel, and Yitzhak Wonskolaser in Poland), Paramount Pictures founder Adolph Zukor (born Adolph Cukor in Hungary), 20th Century Fox founder William Fox (born Vilmos Fried in Hungary), and Columbia Pictures founder Harry Cohn spearheaded the emergence of Hollywood's film industry.

In short, even before considering the financial prominence of Jews like Henry Lehman, Joseph Seligman, Jacob Schiff, and the Rothschilds – Jewish success was, and remains, obviously disproportionate.

The roots of this success lie both in the Jews' ancestral land and in the Diaspora.

In ancient Judea the Jews cultivated learning as a supreme value, and also legislated compulsory education, centuries before any other civilization. That is how the Jews became history's first literate nation.

Jewish ambition, curiosity and resourcefulness were further fostered outside their land, by the political insecurity, geographic mobility, and cultural interactions that life in the Diaspora often entailed.

Yet from this series' viewpoint what matters is not the cause of Jewish merit, but its future. Now that the Jewish state steadily emerges as the Jewish nation's center of gravity, will Jewish excellence survive the Diaspora's ongoing shrinkage; if so how; and how can Jewish genius impact the rest

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The jewel in Spiritual Zionism's crown.  
Students at the Hebrew University  
of Jerusalem in 1940



of the transitions clouding the future of the Jews?

**THEODOR HERZL** assumed Jewish genius would not only survive the Jewish state's emergence, but also serve it. Others, however, saw nationalism as Jewish distinction's inversion and threat.

"If we consider everything Jewish genius has achieved in the European Diaspora, and what it is achieving now in America," said philosopher George Steiner in a speech at the Weizmann Institute in 1968, "Israel will seem like a solution which is at least partially irrelevant, and maybe even antithetical, to the commitments of Jewish humanism."

Titled "The Wandering Jew" and constituting a song of praise for the historic Jew's replacement of land with intellect, that speech insinuated that true Jewish excellence would never peak in a national homeland the way it did in the Diaspora's many lands; that the Zionist project could win wars and also airlift, house, and protect millions of Jews, but it could not produce Spinozas, Einsteins and Freuds.

Half a century on, Israel has refuted the French-born American Jewish thinker's pessimism.

Einstein, Bohr, Pinter, Pasternak and the rest of 186 Jewish Nobel Laureates in the sciences, economics and literature have been joined in recent years by nine Israelis, besides the three Israeli statesmen who joined Henry Kissinger, Rene Cassin, Elie Wiesel and three other Jewish Nobel Peace Prize winners.

Moreover, after initial teething Israel has become a universally saluted economic success story and a wellspring of technological and medical innovation.

Having blessed mankind with hundreds of inventions – from solar heating, drip irriga-

tion, the collision-alert system, the driving navigation application Waze and the disk on key to the OrCam system that enables the visually impaired to see, Given Imaging's pill-cam capsule that videos the digestive system, the Copaxone drug for multiple sclerosis, the Azilect treatment for Parkinson's, and the ReWalk bionic walking assistance system for paraplegics – Israel has vindicated Herzl's vision in "The Jewish State" that "the world will be freed by our liberty, enriched by our wealth, magnified by our greatness."

Seen this way, Israel has not only realized Herzl's vision, but also defied the school of thought that in 1897 challenged him and by 1947 seemed defeated, but in 2017 should be seen as the Zionist project's missing piece: Spiritual Zionism

**LED BY THINKER** and essayist Ahad Ha'am (pen name of Asher Ginsberg, 1856-1927), Spiritual Zionism (also known as Cultural Zionism) doubted the feasibility of Herzl's plan.

The Ottomans, they warned, will not allow the Jewish state's establishment, and even if they did, most Jews would not move there. Consequently, Herzl's great hope – that Zionism will eradicate antisemitism – would be dashed.

Worst of all, the prospective state would be weak, "its mighty neighbors' ball of play," depending for its survival on "diplomacy's plots" while "perpetually submitting to the moment's power that be," as Ahad Ha'am put it the morning after the first Zionist congress, in defiance of the euphoria Herzl sparked. The Jews, he wrote, needed not diplomats, but prophets.

Regardless of geopolitics, Ahad Ha'am decried what he called the Jewish people's "spiritual crisis," alluding to Western Jews' widespread assimilation, and the rest of the

Jews' low self-esteem.

Standing by the Western Wall on Passover eve in 1889, and having "found there many of our brethren, residents of Jerusalem, standing and praying very loudly, their faces dull, their movements strange and their outfits awkward," he noted: "These stones attest to our land's destruction, and these people attest to our nation's destruction – which of the two destructions is worse?" If a land is destroyed, but its people remain alive and vigorous, they will produce the leaders that will rebuild their land, he wrote, "but if a nation is destroyed, who will lead it, and where will its salvation come from?"

Spiritual Zionism therefore sought to establish in Zion not a Jewish state, but what it called "a spiritual center"; a cultural engine driven by the Jewish people's intellectual elite, which would nurture in Zion Hebrew culture and Jewish genius, and supply the Diaspora with spiritual inspiration and national pride.

That is why Hebrew's revival, the rise of Tel Aviv as a Hebrew-speaking city, the blossoming in Jaffa of modern Hebrew authors and poets like S.Y. Agnon, H.N. Bialik and Y.H. Brenner, the modern publication of Jewish sources and Hebrew newspapers, and the proliferation of Hebrew-speaking kindergartens and schools were much more urgent for spiritual Zionists than meetings with Kaisers, sultans and popes.

It was a clash of visions. Herzl's political Zionism warned that the Diaspora held catastrophe in store for the Jews. That is why he sought the Jews' geographic relocation, political restoration, economic reinvention and diplomatic recognition. On cultural renewal he was as pessimistic as Spiritual Zionists were about his Jewish state. "Who amongst us would be able to but a railway ticket in Hebrew?" he wondered.

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## Jewish World



Spiritual Zionism's tragedy. Martin Buber (left) and Judah Magnes (center) testifying before the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry in Jerusalem in 1946

Ahad Ha'am, who was secular, thought that a nation's language, literature, and heritage are its soul, and that without them there was no use for sovereignty and government. Zionism's emphasis, he therefore argued, should not be on the political "crisis of the Jews" but on the spiritual "crisis of Judaism."

Underlying this prognosis were two other assumptions that in due course would prove fateful for his school of thought.

The first was that antisemitism did not constitute an existential threat to the Jewish people. The second was that the Arab challenge to Zionism was existential.

In the latter regard, Ahad Ha'am was as prophetic as Herzl was on antisemitism, warning as early as 1891 that "should a time come when the life of our people in the Land of Israel will develop to the extent that it will push the indigenous population ... it will not easily make way."

It was the first prediction of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and it would inspire spiritual Zionists long after Ahad Ha'am's death in 1927, as they sought dialogue with Palestinian leaders through the movement they established in 1925, Brit Shalom ("Covenant of Peace.")

These assumptions united Spiritual Zionists, but on one main issue they disagreed – the Diaspora.

Biblical historian Yehezkel Kaufmann (1889-1963), for instance, thought life in the Diaspora was degenerating Hebrew culture. He therefore agreed with the political Zionists that most Jews should live in the Land

of Israel, though for the sake of Hebrew culture's revival.

Philosopher Jacob Klatzkin (1882-1948) thought the Diaspora deformed Jewish existence in all its aspects and should not even survive as home to a minority of the Jews.

Ahad Ha'am did not share this radicalism, and thought the Diaspora was livable. Others thought the Diaspora was not only tolerable, but indispensable, and that Zion could not replace it.

"If it were physically possible to bring all Jews here," said one spiritual Zionist in a speech in Jerusalem in 1923, "the world would be a poorer place, and the Jewish people would deprive itself of a large part of its opportunity to be of service to mankind."

His name was Judah Magnes, and he would come to personify Spiritual Zionism in its purest form – from the vision to the tragedy.

**BORN IN** San Francisco in 1877 to a family of German origin, Magnes was schooled in the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati and in the universities of Berlin and Heidelberg.

Visiting East European Jews' improvised synagogues in Berlin while hobnobbing with Zionist intellectuals, Magnes soon rejected his original milieu's anti-Zionism. His defiance did not prevent the charismatic scholar's eventual appointment as leader of the Reform establishment's flagship synagogue, Manhattan's Temple Emanuel, overlooking Central Park.

However, in a Passover sermon in 1910,

the rebel and Spiritual Zionist in him admonished his own congregation that their Judaism is "petrified," that their children are "ignorant of the Bible and of the vast literature" beyond it, and that they view life "through Christian eyes."

And after praising "the Jewish masses" for having studied "in Jewish schools through Jewish books in the Jewish spirit," and after calling on his congregants to teach Hebrew, shed the Reform prayer book, and slash membership fees so the poor can also join their elitist house of worship – Magnes was duly fired.

Being the consummate Spiritual Zionist he was, Magnes spent the following years cultivating the Diaspora's future, by leading the Kehillah organization devoted to New York Jewry, and fighting government by joining the American pacifist movement's leadership during World War I.

Imbued with humanist fervor, cultural longing, and national romanticism, Magnes climbed Mount Scopus, where he led the establishment of the Hebrew University as its first chancellor the following decade.

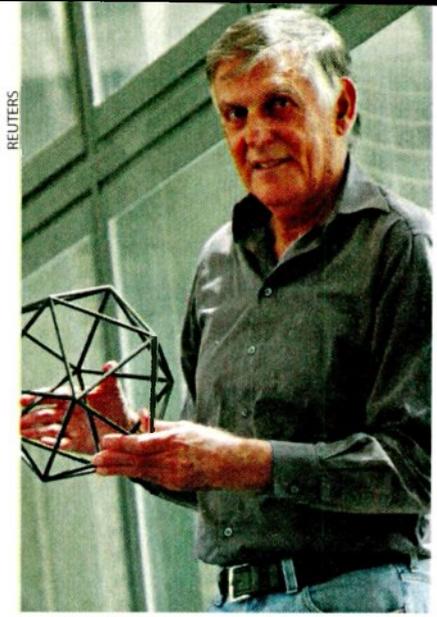
With the founding board including towering figures like Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Martin Buber and Chaim Weizmann, the Hebrew University soon became not only a respected academic institution, but the jewel in Spiritual Zionism's crown.

In fact, with 98 percent of the Jewish people remaining in the Diaspora while scholars researched at, and students flocked to Mt. Scopus, and with thousands in British Palestine raised in Hebrew while their parents read Hebrew novels and newspapers along Tel Aviv's budding strip of cafés, music halls and Hebrew theaters – Zion's emergence as the Jewish people's spiritual center did not seem farfetched.

The violence that soon erupted on both sides of the Mediterranean all but buried this quest.

The rise of Nazism vindicated already in the 1930s Herzl's doomsday prophecies, when an influx of German refugees highlighted Zion's utility as a political refuge for persecuted Jews. The Holocaust then made plain the Jews' need for a state and an army.

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Chemist Dan Shechtman with a model of the quasicrystal that won him the Nobel Prize. Israel's new reputation as a wellspring of excellence can turn it into the Jewish people's educational center

Diehard Spiritual Zionists, led by Magnes, still preached the idea of a binational state, where Jews and Arabs would share power. On April 13, 1948, however, that too pretty much came to an end.

When a convoy of 77 doctors and nurses was massacred on Mt. Scopus's foothills en route to the Hadassah Hospital he helped established there, a heartbroken Magnes sailed to the US where he died half a year later, aged 71.

As if to complete the symbolism, the war that distanced his dream from mainstream Zionism's soul also severed his Hebrew University campus from the newborn state's body, when Mt. Scopus ended up stranded as an Israeli islet in enemy land.

Observing the forlorn mountain from a newly split Jerusalem's Israeli side, Mt. Scopus loomed as a monument to a noble and humanistic, but evidently failed, quest for a Spiritual Zionism.

Now that forgotten vision can assume new life.

**WITH THE** Diaspora shrinking, as discussed in the first part of this series; with Jewish solidarity fraying, as we saw in the second part; and with Judaism splintering and antisemitism resurging, as discussed in the third and fourth essays – Jewish genius may now hold the key to reinventing the future of the Jews.

The idea would be to model Israel as the Jewish nation's center of academic teaching, learning, and research; to take one big step beyond what Birthright has achieved by bringing Jewish young adults to Israel for short visits, and now bring them here to obtain their entire higher education.

The New Spiritual Center will comprise a cluster of new universities that will teach in a mixture of English, Hebrew, and other tongues. True, there are programs for overseas students in Israel's major universities. However, they mostly offer one-year programs for degrees earned elsewhere, and they charge between four and six times as much as the Israeli undergraduate's average annual tuition of roughly 10,000 shekels. This is how the three leading universities

attract just over 5,000 students annually. In addition, there are much cheaper programs for new immigrants.

The New Spiritual Center would not be about any of this. It would pull tens of thousands of Diaspora Jews to the Jewish state not as Israel-bound immigrants, but as Diaspora-bound Jews; not for one-year programs, but for full undergraduate and graduate programs; not in order to help Israel, but to help themselves, by tapping into Israel's new prestige as an economic powerhouse, a technological locomotive, a celebration of literary, filmic and musical inspiration, and a wellspring of Jewish genius.

Rather than charge the Diaspora's students higher tuition, as Israeli universities now do, the Jewish people's New Spiritual Center will offer the same low tuitions Israelis pay; and it will do so not in order to strengthen the Jewish state, but, in the spirit of Ahad Ha'am's vision, in order to reconnect the Jewish people – to each other, to their heritage, and to the future that they will proceed to jointly craft.

Home to some of the world's best medical, engineering, business and liberal arts schools, the New Spiritual Center will attract students from across the Diaspora, because its degrees will be among the world's most prestigious. The New Spiritual Center will also be a major employer for Diaspora Jews, as it will prioritize Jewish academics much like the Law of Return.

Meanwhile, as Israel becomes home to most of the world's Jews, its emergence as the Jewish world's spiritual center will help the Diaspora preserve itself and also find new meaning.

Students emerging from its campuses will establish the secular Jewish schools that the Diaspora sorely lacks at present.

Moreover, while spending some of their most formative years in their ancestral land, the Diaspora Jews will assume a working knowledge of Hebrew, thus turning the already revived language into the Jewish nation's lingua franca.

Judaism will also benefit from the emergence of the New Spiritual Center; not only because its graduates will be equipped to

study in the original Hebrew the major texts of their heritage, but because the encounter between a mostly non-Orthodox Diaspora and a largely traditional Israel will intensify, and thus help narrow the gaps that are currently splitting the Jewish faith.

Finally, the Mideast conflict's impact on Jewish solidarity will also be softened, since Diaspora students studying in Israel will emerge better informed about the conflict's complexities and context, and become less vulnerable to the kind of anti-Israel propaganda their American and European schools frequently host.

The Jewish state tried once to embrace an aspect of Spiritual Zionism.

It happened late last century, when Israel preached its New Middle East vision. Israel hoped to become a light unto neighboring nations, by showing them the way to prosperity, enlightenment and democracy.

It was a colossal failure, underscored by the warning attached to the Arabic version of Shimon Peres's "The New Middle East," whose Egyptian publisher cautioned his readers that Peres and his vision were proof that the Jews were out to conquer the world.

Back in 1882, Zionist thinker Leo Pinsker argued that European Jewry's emancipation had failed, and the Jews had therefore better emancipate themselves by building their own state. In that spirit, the Jewish state that has failed to become a light unto enemy neighbors – can become instead a light unto distant Jews.