



26.47x31.06	1/2	38 עמוד	the jerusalem post - magazine	05/2026	97654953-8
בנימין זאב הרצל - בהקשר לציונו - 80790					

: BOOKS BOOKS Recovering a forgotten Sephardi Zionist voice

## BOOKS

# Recovering a forgotten Sephardi Zionist voice

• ASHLEY PERRY PEREZ

There is a quiet but consequential and long overdue intellectual correction underway in contemporary Jewish thought: the rediscovery of Sephardi voices in the formulation and formation of modern political Zionism.

Zionism is too often framed as a late 19th-century Eastern and Central European, largely secular movement, born in response to modern nationalism and antisemitism. The book *The Restoration of Israel* challenges that narrative with force and clarity.

*The Restoration of Israel* is the latest volume by Da'at Press, a publishing house dedicated to reviving and advancing a classical Jewish intellectual tradition that stretches from the sages and Geonic period, through Spain and beyond, a tradition that views Torah as a disciplined, rational, and expansive pursuit grounded in the belief that the author of the Torah is also the author of the world.

Da'at Press publishes books from that tradition, faithfully and beautifully, so they can live again in the hands, minds, and study halls of today. They cover everything, from Rabbi Saadia Gaon to Rambam; from Rabbi Almosnino to Rabbi Benamozegh; from Rabbi Nieto to Mori Yosef Qafih, and beyond.

The publishing house is closely associated with The Habura, an online and



RABBI JOSEPH DWECK teaches at The Habura. (The Habura.com)

physical *beit midrash* (study hall) dedicated to studying, teaching, and publishing Torah as a lens through which we view and interact with God's world.

This approach is rooted in the Geonic-Sephardi tradition, led by the head of the *beit midrash*, Rabbi Joseph Dweck, a leading voice in contemporary Orthodox Jewish thought, and until his recent *aliyah*, the senior rabbi of the S&P Sephardi Community of the UK.

This volume does not merely recover a forgotten sermon; it restores an entire worldview, one in which Zionism emerges organically from centuries of Sephardi religious thought, communal practice, and historical experience.

At the heart of the book lies a Passover sermon delivered in Montreal in 1900 by Rabbi Aharon David Meldola de Sola, a leading figure of the Western Sephardi world, otherwise known as the Spanish and Portuguese Jewish community.

The S&P is a community that fled north and west after the expulsions, forced conversions, and Inquisitions in Spain and Portugal, and formed many of the great Jewish communities of today, whether in North and Latin America, the United Kingdom, and other locations in Western Europe.

It is a community deeply rooted in the Andalusian-Geonic Jewish worldview, fusing the rationalist legacy of the Jewish sages with the cultural openness of medieval Spain, producing a tradition that saw no contradiction between Torah and worldly knowledge. This tradition ap-

proached faith, philosophy, and practical life as part of a single, coherent pursuit of divine truth.

Surrounding the sermon by Rabbi Meldola de Sola are two substantial framing essays and a preface that together form a cohesive intellectual argument: that Sephardim were not late adopters of Zionism but were among its earliest and most natural proponents, long before Theodor Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress.

### Zionism as destiny, not innovation

The preface of the book sets the tone, situating Rabbi Meldola de Sola within the Western Sephardi diaspora, descendants of the Iberian expulsions who built resilient, confident communities across the Atlantic world. These were Jews deeply integrated into public life, often secure and prosperous, yet never detached from the enduring pull of Zion.

What is striking is how the preface reframes Zionism not as a rupture but as continuity.

It describes Meldola de Sola's intervention at a moment when Zionism was widely seen as "a political wager, a spiritual provocation, a risky distraction." Against this uncertainty, Meldola de Sola offers not innovation but recognition: the Jewish return to the land is not new, but covenantal.

The theological core is equally important. The preface highlights Meldola de Sola's rejection of the false dichotomy between faith and action. Jews, he insists, must not passively

await redemption.

Rather, "People pray, and then they build; they trust, and then they organize; they hope, and then they plant." This formulation anticipates, and even predates, later Religious Zionist thinkers, most notably Rabbi Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel and Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook.

Perhaps the most powerful insight is the warning against the seduction of exile. The Western Sephardi communities, secure under British and North American rule, could easily have mistaken comfort for permanence.

Meldola de Sola refutes that illusion. Prosperity, he argues, is a test of responsibility, not a justification for disengagement.

### The Sephardi worldview: Rooted, confident, and activist

The first essay in the book is by Rabbi Shalom Morris, rabbi of Bevis Marks Synagogue, the oldest synagogue in the UK. It was established by Sephardim who founded the British Jewish community after being personally invited by Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell in the 17th century.

Rabbi Morris's essay deepens this argument by grounding Meldola de Sola's worldview in the broader Sephardi intellectual tradition. Unlike many Eastern European Jews of the period, whose experience of persecution often produced caution or passivity, Western Sephardim possessed a sense of historical rootedness and confidence.

## THE RESTORATION OF ISRAEL: RABBI MELDOLA DE SOLA ON JEWISH NATIONALITY

By Aharon Meldola de Sola  
Da'at Press  
76 pages; \$18



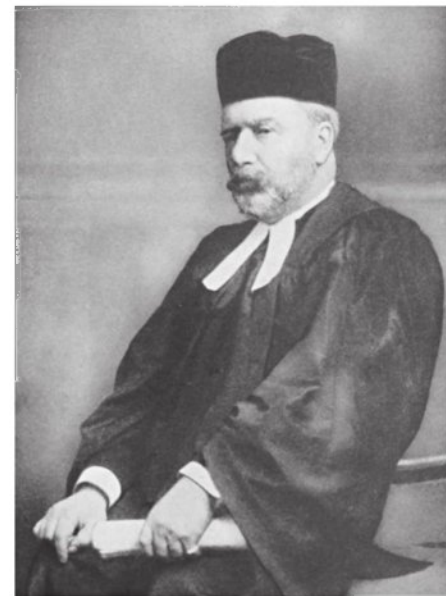


25.78x29.34	2/2	39 עמוד	the jerusalem post - magazine	05/2026	97654955-0
בנימין זאב הרצל - בהקשר לציונו - 80790					

: BOOKS BOOKS Recovering a forgotten Sephardi Zionist voice



THE SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE Synagogue of Montreal, aka Shearith Israel, is the oldest Jewish congregation in Canada and was formally established in 1768.



RABBI AHARON DAVID MELDOLA DE SOLA. (Wikimedia Commons)

They had navigated exile, rebuilt institutions, and engaged with broader society without losing their identity. This confidence translated into a distinctive openness to Zionism.

For Sephardim, the idea of return was neither radical nor threatening; it was familiar.

As Morris notes, Sephardi history was filled with practical engagement with the Land of Israel, through settlement, communal organizing, philanthropy, and religious obligation. Zionism, therefore, was not a break with tradition but rather its natural extension.

The essay also highlights a critical theological point: Sephardim did not see human initiative as a challenge to divine will.

On the contrary, they understood that “He does not employ supernatural agencies where natural means will suffice.” This line, drawn from Meldola de Sola’s sermon, encapsulates a worldview that is at once deeply religious and profoundly pragmatic.

Equally significant is the rejection of the “dual loyalty” accusation. At a time when many feared that Zionism would undermine Jewish citizenship in Western countries, Meldola de Sola argued the opposite.

In a discussion that became more present by the day for many Diaspora Jews, loyalty to Zion and loyalty to one’s country were not only compatible but mutually reinforcing. “A man may love both his father and his mother,” he quotes. “Palestine is my fatherland, England my motherland”.

This is not merely a defensive argument – it is a confident assertion of Jewish identity within modern political frameworks. It reflects a Sephardi ease with complexi-

ty, an ability to hold multiple affiliations without contradiction.

#### Sephardi Zionism before Zionism

The second essay, by Ashley Perry (Perez), the writer of this review, broadens the historical lens further. His essay dismantles the misconception that Zionism began in the 19th century, by tracing a lineage of Sephardi figures who embodied both spiritual longing and practical action toward the Land of Israel.

From Yehuda Halevi’s poetic yearning to Nachmanides’s insistence that settling the land is a binding commandment, from Dona Gracia Nasi’s attempt to rebuild Tiberias to Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai’s proto-Zionist political program, the essay presents a compelling case: Zionism was not invented; it was a constant and an integral part of Jewish existence through the ages.

What distinguishes these figures is not merely their attachment to Zion but their willingness to physically act upon it. This is perhaps the defining feature of the Sephardi worldview presented in the book – the refusal to separate prayer from practice.

Zion is not only a liturgical aspiration but also a lived responsibility.

This tradition culminates in figures like Sir Moses Montefiore, described as “a Zionist before the word was invented,” who translated religious conviction into tangible achievements, building neighborhoods, negotiating with authorities, and laying the groundwork for future Jewish resettlement.

The cumulative effect is powerful. By the time Herzl appears on the historical stage, the intellectual and practical foundations of Zionism have already been laid,

largely by Sephardi thinkers and actors.

In fact, as Perry makes clear, without the work, thought, and practical application of his Sephardi co-religionists, especially Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai, from whom the Hungarian journalist’s grandfather learned directly, Herzl might not have been inspired by the idea of the Jewish state.

#### The sermon: A theology of action

If the essays provide the intellectual scaffolding, the sermon itself is the beating heart of the book. Delivered on Passover, the festival of national rebirth, it is both a theological argument and a moral exhortation.

Meldola de Sola begins with a striking metaphor: Just as nature awakens from winter, so too has the Jewish nation merely “slept during the long winter of its dispersion,” carrying within it “those germs of national life” awaiting revival. This framing transforms exile from a state of decline into one of suspended potential.

From this premise, he builds a compelling argument for restoration.

Jewish survival, he insists, is itself evidence of divine providence. The same God who fulfilled the prophecies of dispersion will fulfill the prophecies of return. To doubt one is to undermine the other.

However, the sermon’s real force lies in its ethical challenge. Meldola de Sola turns to his congregation and asks: “Will you allow prosperity to dull your sense of responsibility? Will you pray for Zion while secretly hoping it remains distant?”

This critique resonates with particular urgency today. It is a warning against complacency, and against the temptation to confuse security with perma-

nence.

The central theological innovation is his insistence on human agency. Zionism, he argues, does not reject divine providence; it fulfills it. “Providence expects us to employ the faculties...with which we have been blessed.”

Prayer without action is not piety; it is avoidance.

He is equally clear about the practical dimension of Zionism. It is not merely a spiritual movement but a concrete program: securing “a publicly, legally assured home,” transforming barren land into productive settlements, and providing relief for persecuted Jews.

This is Zionism as both a moral imperative and a practical necessity.

#### A Sephardi correction to Zionist history

Taken together, the book offers more than a historical recovery – it provides a corrective to the dominant narrative of Zionism. It shows that long before Herzl, before Basel, and before political Zionism became a modern movement, there existed a deeply rooted Sephardi tradition that combined faith, pragmatism, and national and political consciousness.

This tradition was marked by several defining features: a seamless integration of religion and action, a confidence born of historical continuity, and a refusal to see exile as final. It was, in many ways, uniquely suited to recognize and embrace Zionism when it emerged in its modern political form.

The release of Meldola de Sola’s sermon is therefore not merely an academic exercise. It is a reminder that the intellectual foundations of Zionism are broader, deeper, and more diverse than often assumed. ■

*The reviewer is an international strategic campaigns and communications adviser to leaders and a former senior government consultant in Israel. He has written extensively on Jewish history, Zionism, and Sephardi-related issues.*