

**“In Justice Shall Zion Be Redeemed”  
Ahad Ha’am, Cultural Zionism, and the Moral Crisis of the Israeli State**

In the late nineteenth century, as political Zionism began to take shape under leaders like Theodor Herzl, Ahad Ha’am (born Asher Ginsberg) emerged as a dissenting voice. He believed that a Jewish homeland could not be built solely through political power or territorial sovereignty but had to be grounded in cultural renewal, ethical responsibility, and spiritual depth. His vision, known as Cultural Zionism, prioritized moral introspection and coexistence over statehood achieved through force. In light of the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Palestine, Ahad Ha’am’s warnings about the dangers of nationalism and the mistreatment of Arab populations resonate with renewed urgency. Ahad Ha’am’s vision of ethical, cultural Zionism offers an alternative framework that challenges the violent nationalism tied to the current Israeli state.

**Historical Context: Political vs. Cultural Zionism**

Ahad Ha’am’s concern with the mainstream political Zionism advocated by Theodor Herzl was that the pursuit of political sovereignty without roots in ethical and cultural renewal would lead to a morally hollow Jewish state. In late 19th century Odessa, antisemitism to the Jewish ethnicity was integrated into the culture so deeply that “many of the most prominent Zionist thinkers of those days had been born into Orthodox families but to some degree or another left the world of Jewish tradition.”<sup>1</sup> With these thinkers acting as the leadership of the Zionist movement, “Zionism would become a fusion of profound Jewish knowledge and, at the same time, hostility to much of the tradition in which they had been raised.”<sup>2</sup> If the Zionist movement were to lead to the establishment of a Jewish state that lacks a Jewish moral compass, Ahad Ha’am went so far as to write that he believed, “It would be better if the Jewish people were to

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Gordis, *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn* (New York, NY: Collins Publishers, 2016), 54.

<sup>2</sup> Gordis, *Israel*, 55.

disappear from the face of history than to find itself trapped in the meaningless power mongering of a small state populated by individuals of Jewish ancestry but which would otherwise not be a Jewish state.”<sup>3</sup> In a time where nationalism and antisemitism were both on the rise globally, Ha’am explains that creating a Jewish nation in name but not in practice could cause both ideas to culminate in violence and negative public opinion. While Herzl’s Zionist movement wanted recognition on the international stage, Ahad Ha’am outwardly spoke that a land for the Jewish people shouldn’t have roots in nationalist sovereignty but a place for Jews to safely practice their religion and tradition.

In the original European Zionist debate, Ahad Ha’am’s vision of a land for Jewish people was different from the nation political Zionism was envisioning. He explained an approach to the land of Israel that may have seemed idealist in the early 19th century but could be implemented today to ease the violent extremist nationalism the State of Israel practices today. Political Zionism, as it first emerged, was shaped by Theodor Herzl’s exposure to the rising tide of antisemitism in Europe. According to Daniel Gordis in his 2016 book *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn*, Herzl was inspired in part by a member of the Hungarian Parliament and founder of the National Antisemitic Party, who proposed that the “Jewish problem” of Eastern Europe could be solved by encouraging Jewish emigration and self-isolation.<sup>4</sup> Rather than resisting this discriminatory logic, Herzl reimagined it as an opportunity: the creation of a Jewish state would not only provide physical refuge for Jews but would also eliminate the need for antisemitism itself. In his 1902 novel *Altneuland*, Herzl argued that a Jewish state, whether in Argentina or Palestine, would serve the interests of both Jews and non-Jews. He believed that “not only would Jews in a Jewish state not suffer from antisemitism, but the existence of a

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<sup>3</sup> Gordis, *Israel*, 56.

<sup>4</sup> Gordis, *Israel*, 19.

Jewish state would usher in an end to antisemitism everywhere.”<sup>5</sup> For Herzl, sovereignty and territorial control were the key to Jewish survival and global acceptance.

Ahad Ha’am, by contrast, offered a fundamentally different vision. He rejected the idea that Jewish liberation could be achieved simply through political power or the establishment of a nation-state. Instead, he envisioned the Land of Israel as a spiritual and cultural hub, not a political entity. As Gordis describes, Ha’am proposed the creation of a “colony” in Palestine—a center led by the intellectual and cultural elite of the Jewish world—which would serve to spiritually renew the Jewish people everywhere. For him, the flourishing of Jewish life did not depend on statehood. In fact, he remained deeply skeptical of Herzl’s political project, fearing that statehood achieved without ethical foundations would be disastrous. “The true answer,” Ha’am wrote, “is to America and to Eretz Israel. The economic side of the Jewish question needs to be answered in America, while the idealistic side... it is only in Eretz Israel.” He imagined a pluralistic Jewish future, one where different Jewish communities—whether in Palestine, Europe, or America—could thrive in their own ways.<sup>6</sup>

Despite increasing violence against Jews in Eastern Europe, including the brutal 1903 pogrom in Kishinev, Ha’am never fully abandoned his critique of Herzl’s nationalist project. Though he acknowledged the urgent need to find refuge for persecuted Jews, he remained convinced that building a Jewish state without a foundation of moral and cultural introspection would ultimately betray the very soul of the Jewish people. In hindsight, his ethical caution reads less like idealism and more like prophetic clarity—especially when considered alongside the extremist nationalism and moral compromises that mark the present-day Israeli state.

This moral clarity extended beyond concerns about the internal character of the Jewish state; it

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<sup>5</sup> Gordis, *Israel*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Gordis, *Israel*, 57.

also shaped Ha'am's view of how Jews should relate to the non-Jewish populations already inhabiting the land. While his critiques of political Zionism are often remembered for their emphasis on spiritual and cultural renewal, Ha'am also recognized that the Zionist movement risked repeating the very patterns of domination and exclusion that Jews themselves had long suffered.

### **Ethical Concerns: Nationalism and the "Arab Question"**

While Ahad Ha'am's primary critique of political Zionism focused on its lack of cultural and spiritual depth, his writings also reveal deep ethical concerns about how Zionist settlement in Palestine would affect the Arab population already living there. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Ha'am did not romanticize the land as empty or waiting to be redeemed. Instead, he confronted the reality of Arab presence and warned that a Zionist project devoid of empathy and justice would not only provoke resistance but would compromise the moral foundations of Jewish life itself.

In his landmark 1891 essay "Truth from Eretz Yisrael," Ha'am directly challenged the myth popular among European Jews that the land of Palestine was a barren desert awaiting cultivation by returning Jews. "We who live abroad are accustomed to believe that almost all Eretz Israel is now uninhabited desert and whoever wishes can buy land there as he pleases. But this is not true," he wrote. "It is very difficult to find in the land cultivated fields that are not used for planting."<sup>7</sup> Rather than encountering an empty landscape, Ha'am observed a region where land was already in use and where the Arab population was deeply embedded in the economic and social fabric of the land.

Moreover, Ha'am challenged the widespread and prejudiced belief among European Jews that Arabs were primitive, ignorant, or unaware of the changes happening around them. He

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<sup>7</sup> "Ahad Ha'am," [www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org), n.d., <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ahad-ha-rsquo-am>.

emphasized that this perception was dangerously misguided. In reality, he observed, Palestinian Arabs were fully aware of the Zionist movement's goals and intentions. Their silence in the face of growing Jewish immigration, he argued, should not be misinterpreted as indifference or acceptance. Ha'am warned that this silence should not be mistaken for consent; if Jews continued to displace Arabs, "the natives are not going to just step aside so easily."<sup>8</sup>

Ha'am's words were both ethically grounded and strategically insightful, but they were largely ignored by the mainstream Zionist movement. As Gordis notes, the leadership of the Yishuv (the newforming Jewish community in Palestine) did not sufficiently account for Arab resistance to Jewish immigration and settlement. When Palestinian anger erupted into violence in 1921, "the Zionist leadership now realized they had not sufficiently factored Arab resistance into their planning."<sup>9</sup> The assumption that native Palestinians would simply disappear, or accept displacement quietly, reflected exactly the arrogance Ha'am had warned against decades earlier. He recognized early on that sustainable coexistence required more than strategic planning but also humility, recognition, and justice.

This vision, rooted in empathy rather than domination, was expressed in early Zionist circles through movements like *Brit Shalom* (Covenant of Peace), which was inspired by Ahad Ha'am's ideas. This group of intellectuals believed that the Zionist movement should renounce its pursuit of statehood altogether and instead build a binational state where Jews and Arabs could live as equals, the original supporters of the "one-state solution."<sup>10</sup> Their conviction was that a Jewish state, forged through exclusion, force, and violence, would lead to perpetual conflict. In contrast, peaceful coexistence and shared sovereignty might create a future more authentic to Judaism's

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<sup>8</sup> "Ahad Ha'am," [www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org), n.d., <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ahad-ha-rsquo-am>.

<sup>9</sup> Gordis, *Israel*, 104.

<sup>10</sup> Gordis, *Israel*, 58.

ethical core.

Over time, Ahad Ha'am's influence even extended to prominent political Zionists. Chaim Weizmann, one of the central architects of the Zionist state, echoed Ha'am's concerns in the face of growing Jewish violence in Mandatory Palestine. As terrorism among Yishuv factions escalated during the 1940s, Weizmann declared at the Twenty-Second Zionist Congress in 1946 that terrorism was "a cancer in the body," warning that "creating a Jewish state by 'un-Jewish' methods would defeat the entire purpose."<sup>11</sup> Quoting the prophet Jeremiah, he affirmed that "in justice shall Zion be redeemed, not by any other means."

Time has proven that Ha'am's legacy was not confined to abstract cultural ideals but rather a direct urgent ethical critique of the nationalist trajectory Zionism was beginning to take. He foresaw that nationalism without moral responsibility would not only alienate the Arab population but also corrupt the spiritual and ethical soul of the Jewish people both within their communities and in the international public eye. His insistence on justice and mutual respect challenges both the early failures of the Zionist project and the ongoing crisis in Israel-Palestine today, where policies of occupation, dispossession, and violence continue to dominate. Ha'am's early writings emerge as a moral compass that points to a different path for Zionism – not one of erasure and supremacy, but one of coexistence, humility, and ethical renewal.

### **Cultural Zionism as a Vision of Jewish Ethical Identity**

Ahad Ha'am's vision of Zionism was not only a critique of Herzlian nationalism but also a constructive alternative rooted in culture, ethics, and identity. Unlike political Zionists who understandably sought immediate statehood to solve the "Jewish problem," Ahad Ha'am proposed a slower, deeper transformation: the creation of a cultural and spiritual center in the Land of Israel that could revitalize Jewish life across the diaspora. For him, the core challenge

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<sup>11</sup> Gordis, *Israel*, 144.

facing the Jewish people was not merely political vulnerability but cultural disintegration. Jewish identity had eroded under the pressures of modernity and assimilation.

Ahad Ha'am argued that Jewish survival required not sovereignty alone but a revival of national culture. He believed that Judaism, emerging from centuries of exile and encountering modern secular thought, was at risk of fragmentation and loss of coherence. This fragmentation could not be healed through statehood alone. Rather, Jewish life needed a center where its culture could develop organically, freely absorbing modern influences while remaining rooted in tradition. As he put it, the return to the land should create a vibrant Jewish society working "in every branch of culture, from agriculture and crafts to science and literature," not for the sake of a state but for the flourishing of the Jewish spirit.<sup>12</sup>

At the heart of Cultural Zionism was the idea that Jewish identity could be expressed through culture rather than religious orthodoxy. Ahad Ha'am introduced a revolutionary concept in Jewish thought that has become more normalized today: that Jewish culture and Jewish religion could be decoupled. While he respected traditional observance, he believed that secular Jews could still find meaning in Jewish texts, language, rituals, and holidays without theological belief. Ha'am brought the idea that the Jewish people were the "People of the Book" to the forefront, explaining how education was an important aspect of the Jewish identity, regardless of spiritual belief. This opened the door for a modern, secular Jewish identity that could thrive in dialogue with tradition rather than in rejection of it. He insisted that Judaism's value was not dependent on the divine commandment but on the intrinsic worth of the Jewish people's historical and cultural legacy.<sup>13</sup>

With the emergence of Zionism as a whole in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Hebrew

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<sup>12</sup> Marc J. Rosenstein, "The Secular Zionist Revolution: Ahad Ha'am, ~1900 CE," in *Turning Points in Jewish History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 304-305, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv19x43d.29>.

<sup>13</sup> Rosenstein, "The Secular Zionist Revolution," 299.

language (which was used for thousands of years only for rabbinical study) was revived as a living, modern language. For Cultural Zionists, language was a vessel of collective memory and a critical tool in forming a renewed Jewish consciousness. Ahad Ha'am and his contemporaries pioneered Hebrew essays, literature, and poetry, envisioning a future where Hebrew would be the spoken and intellectual language of the Jewish people in their homeland. The Hebrew Renaissance was not only a linguistic project but a moral and national one—an effort to unify Jewish identity around a shared cultural foundation. Gordis notes that Hebrew literature quickly became a central arena in which Jews articulated competing visions of what Jewish identity could and should be. In Palestine, much like in Europe, literature became a medium for both imagining a reconstituted Jewish national home and expressing the internal conflicts that defined Zionist life. Authors and poets were not peripheral figures—they played a central role in shaping the movement, both within the Yishuv and in the cultural landscape of the future Israeli state.<sup>14</sup> This literary dimension of Cultural Zionism reinforced Ha'am's belief that a truly Jewish homeland must be rooted not in politics alone but in ethical and intellectual life.

Ahad Ha'am's approach was pluralistic. He did not demand that all Jews return to Palestine or that Jewish identity take one rigid form. Instead, he imagined the Land of Israel as a spiritual center that would “radiate outward” to Jewish communities around the world, preserving their unity and offering cultural inspiration.<sup>15</sup> He acknowledged that Jews could flourish in places like America, but he believed that a cultural anchor in the ancestral homeland was necessary for the continued vitality of Jewish civilization.

Importantly, Ha'am warned that if a Jewish state were established prematurely before this ethical and cultural revitalization, it would risk becoming hollow and un-Jewish in character. He feared

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<sup>14</sup> Gordis, *Israel*, 75.

<sup>15</sup> Rosenstein, “The Secular Zionist Revolution,” 304-305.



that without a strong cultural core, Zionism would devolve into materialism and militarism, severing the connection between the Jewish people and their spiritual legacy. “A political idea that is not founded upon a national culture,” he wrote, “is liable to lead the people astray from its spiritual power... and thus would be severed the thread that connects [our people] to its past.”<sup>16</sup>

This warning is still relevant today. While Herzl saw the solution to the Jewish problem in creating a sovereign state, Ha'am believed that the true answer lay in cultural and moral renewal. For him, a Jewish homeland shouldn't just be a place of physical safety but a space where Jewish values and identity could be cultivated on ethical grounds. He imagined it as a center for ethical growth and cultural creativity, not just a stronghold of political power. Cultural Zionism was not only a critique of Herzl's approach, but it also offered a meaningful alternative. Even now, this thought serves as a challenger to the dominant forms of Zionism in Israel, whether in the form of aggressive nationalism or rigid religious control.

### **The Modern Israeli State and the Crisis in Palestine**

Today's humanitarian crisis in Palestine marked by unrelenting bombs on neighborhoods, over 60,000 (and counting) Palestinian people killed by the Israel Defense Forces in Gaza since October 7, 2023 (and the Nakba prior), violent settlement expansion in the West Bank, and mass displacement, represents a profound moral crisis that Ahad Ha'am warned of more than a century ago. While political Zionism achieved its goal of establishing a Jewish state, it did so largely by sidelining the ethical questions at the heart of Ha'am's vision. The consequences of building a state with political power but without an ethical foundation are now impossible to ignore. In the face of occupation, structural violence, and continued denial of Palestinian self-determination, Ha'am's caution that sovereignty alone would lead to spiritual decay resonates with renewed urgency.

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<sup>16</sup> Rosenstein, “The Secular Zionist Revolution,” 306.

In practice, the state that emerged from political Zionism has often betrayed the ethical commitments that Ha'am believed should be central to Jewish national life. As Daniel Gordis notes, early Zionists did not sufficiently account for Arab resistance to Jewish immigration, treating the native population as if it would simply vanish or acquiesce to the new order. This oversight, he explains, became painfully clear in the violence of the 1920s and beyond. The result was a nationalism increasingly preoccupied with survival and security at the expense of justice and coexistence.<sup>17</sup> Ha'am had predicted precisely this: that nationalism without ethical restraint would provoke not just external opposition but internal rot.

As the state has developed over the decades, an unfortunate split among Jewish communities in Israel has occurred because of what Yael Zerubavel calls the "Mythological Sabra" identity. As Jews from across the diaspora found themselves living in Palestine with vastly different backgrounds, a new ideal image of the "Israeli Jew" came to light.<sup>18</sup> The idealized "Israeli Jew" identity shown as having a strong, confident past and being connected to the land was a stark difference from the communities of Jews who had fled to Israel for help after a troublesome past. Holocaust survivors, Sephardic Jews, Mizrahi Jews, and Jews from non-European backgrounds (non-white Jewish people) were often seen as weak, overly religious, or disconnected from the land.<sup>19</sup> The Sabra identity became the model of the "real" Israeli and pushed other Jewish identities to the side.

This white supremacist focus on strength and toughness made it easier for early Israeli society to ignore vulnerability and downplay the suffering of others, Jews and Palestinians alike. Palestinian Arabs were seen through the same lens as the "old Jew," shown as stuck in the past,

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<sup>17</sup> Gordis, *Israel*, 105.

<sup>18</sup> Yael Zerubavel, "The 'Mythological Sabra' and Jewish Past: Trauma, Memory, and Contested Identities," *Israel Studies* 7, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 116, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30245588>.

<sup>19</sup> Zerubavel, "The 'Mythological Sabra,'" 116-118.

not modern, and not part of the new Israeli story.<sup>20</sup> In this way, the Sabra ideal supported the idea that only certain types of people belonged in the new Israeli nation, highlighting the lack of empathy within the budding nation.

Ha'am's moral critique also anticipated the dangers of suppressing memory in favor of myth. Zerubavel's analysis shows how Israeli national identity has often relied on silencing the past, whether the trauma of the Holocaust or the reality of Palestinian dispossession, in order to project an image of strength and unity. Yet this suppression only deepens the psychological and ethical fractures within Israeli society. As the ongoing occupation and cycles of violence continue, many Israelis and Jews around the world are beginning to question whether the Zionist dream has become trapped in the very myths it created.

Despite this, there remains room to reimagine Zionism through a cultural and ethical lens. Movements for coexistence, justice-based education, and non-state-centered Jewish identity echo Ha'am's belief that the Jewish people's strength lies not in power alone, but in moral clarity, cultural creativity, and ethical self-restraint. While the dominant model of Zionism remains deeply nationalist, the legacy of Cultural Zionism offers an alternative path—one grounded in coexistence rather than conquest, memory rather than erasure, and cultural vitality rather than militarized survival.

Ultimately, the crisis in Palestine is not just political, but a test of the moral soul of the Jewish state. Ha'am foresaw that a Jewish state built without ethical grounding would betray its own purpose. His vision still offers a compass for those seeking to navigate the complex landscape of identity, power, and justice in Israel-Palestine today with empathy. Cultural Zionism may not have triumphed politically, but its ethical insights remain more vital than ever.

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<sup>20</sup> Zerubavel, "The 'Mythological Sabra'," 118-119.

## Conclusion

Ahad Ha'am's vision of Cultural Zionism was not a rejection of the Jewish desire for a homeland, but a warning against achieving it at the cost of the Jewish people's moral and cultural integrity. While political Zionism succeeded in establishing the State of Israel, it often did so by sidelining the ethical foundations that Ha'am believed were essential to a truly Jewish society. Ha'am's early concerns about nationalism without conscience, and statehood without spiritual depth, have proven strikingly relevant today. The ongoing humanitarian crisis, genocide, and occupation of Palestine, as well as rising Israeli extremism, reveal the dangers of a Zionism divorced from its moral roots.

In contrast to Herzl's state-centered nationalism, Ha'am offered a vision grounded in justice, culture, and coexistence. He believed in building a spiritual center in Eretz Yisrael that would enrich, not dominate, the Jewish world. He called for empathy toward Arabs, a respect for tradition without spirituality/belief, and the cultivation of Jewish values through education, language, and ethical living. His Cultural Zionism provided a model for how Jewish identity could flourish in harmony with others, rather than through exclusion and supremacy.

As Israel continues to grapple with internal division, moral disillusionment, and global criticism, Ahad Ha'am's legacy offers a chance to pause and reconsider. His call for introspection and moral responsibility challenges us to imagine a different kind of Zionism that resists the erasure of history, the oppression of others, and the myth of redemptive violence. In doing so, it invites both Israelis and Jews around the world to reclaim Zionism not as a project of domination, but as a cultural and ethical pursuit. In a time of deep crisis, this path may be the only one that honors both the Jewish past and the possibility of a just and shared future.

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