

Zionist Attitudes Towards Diasporic Jewish Cultures & Communities, 1862-2005

compiled for JVP by Rosza Daniel Lang/Levitsky, 2017

The quotations collected on this resource sheet are from the standard collection of Zionist writing, Arthur Hertzberg's *The Zionist Idea*, except when specified otherwise. They are organized according to the broad divisions of the Zionist movement, largely following Hertzberg.

Note that when most Zionist writers refer to 'the diaspora', they mean the Jewish communities of Europe, above all the Yiddish-speaking world of Eastern and Central Europe. Jewish communities outside Europe are rarely points of reference; their cultures and histories are generally either ignored, fetishized as 'archaic' and thus authentic, or dismissed as valueless because of their ties to other Arab, African, or Asian cultures. The materials below reflect this selective focus.

A Little Introduction

An element that has united all the strains of the Zionist movement, from its founding to the present, is its attitude towards the wide diversity of Jewish cultures created by communities around the world over the last 2500 or so years. That attitude can be summarized by the phrase usually used to define it: "shlilat haglut", which is best translated as Ze'ev Jabotinsky did in 1938, as "liquidation of the diaspora", though it is usually given in English as "negation of the diaspora".

'Shlilat haglut' has had two core meanings, according to Hertzberg and other historians. For Zionism's founders and the main stream of German-speaking Zionism, the 'Revisionist' trend, and much of religious Zionism, it has meant the migration of all Jews who did not wish to convert to Christianity or Islam, or otherwise cease to be Jews, to Palestine. For most cultural and 'spiritual-center' Zionists, some religious Zionists, and many 'mainstream' Zionists in the U.S., who did not envision mass migration from their own homes, it has meant a rejection of existing Jewish cultures as products of the 'galut' ('exile') which should be completely replaced by a new 'national' culture centered on Zionist settlements in Palestine. Strains of socialist and labor Zionism have embraced both meanings at various times.

Adherents of both versions have made their hostility towards diasporic Jewish cultures clear throughout their writings, either in direct descriptions or in the contrasts they made with the new 'national' culture they envisioned (often using eugenicists' racial terminology of "normality"/"degeneracy"/"regeneration"). This has been done both more and less explicitly, with subtler expressions becoming the norm since 1948, as a complete 'ingathering of the exiles' became less and less plausible and the second meaning became dominant in most Zionist circles.

While both versions of 'shlilat haglut' have remained active in Zionist politics, the second has taken on distinctive forms in U.S. progressive Zionist circles over the past few decades. Since the 1980s, they have often attributed the aspects of contemporary Israeli politics they oppose to "diasporic" attitudes and cultures among some Israelis (especially Arab Jews). More recently, some "post-Zionists" have deployed 'shlilat haglut' in the decidedly paradoxical form of describing contemporary Jews' continued comfort in their homes outside of the state of Israel as a new phenomenon - somehow not a continuation of over two millennia of diasporic life, but a break with that history.

"Mainstream" Zionism (in Europe & the U.S.)

Leo Pinsker ("Auto-Emancipation", 1882)

Among the living nations of the earth, the Jews occupy the position of a nation long since dead... [in] a state of decay which is incompatible with the existence of a whole and vital organism.... a people... no longer alive, and yet moving about among the living...

Max Nordau (Speech to the First Zionist Congress, 1897; "Zionism", 1902)

The majority of Jews are a race of accursed beggars.... It is a great sin to let a race, whose ability even its worst enemies do not deny, degenerate in intellectual and physical misery.

...millions of physically degenerate proletarians, without trade or profession... town-bred hucksters and tradesmen, clerks and men of sedentary occupation... [The Zionists] wish to relieve the nations among whom they now vegetate of a presence which is considered disagreeable.

Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (in Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution*, pp.158)

...not natural human beings, leading natural lives, making a living like everybody else.... The Ashkenazi visitors [to Palestine] of all classes all had a Diaspora countenance.

Micah Berdichevski ("Wrecking & Building"; "The Question of Culture", 1900-03)

We ceased to be a people actively adding to its spiritual and material store... our creativity diminished... [we became] spiritual slaves, men whose natural forces had dried up and whose relation to life and to the world was no longer normal... that has almost led us to total decay.

I do not believe those who say that we have a living inner culture... I do not believe it is possible to transmit our ancient light to continuous generations in exile...

Solomon Schechter ("Zionism: A Statement", 1906)

...that process of disintegration which, passing through various degrees of defiance of all Jewish thought and of disloyalty to Israel's history and its mission, terminates variously in different lands.... the Galut of Hannephesh, the Galut of the Jewish soul, wasting away before our very eyes.... an artificial and overstrained condition of things which could no longer last.

Louis Brandeis ("The Jewish Problem and How to Solve It", 1915)

[Zionists] believe that only in Palestine can Jewish life be fully protected from the forces of disintegration; that there alone can the Jewish spirit reach its full and natural development...

Jacob Klatzkin ("Boundaries", 1914-21)

The Galut Is Unworthy of Survival... Galut can only drag out the disgrace of our people and sustain the existence of a people disfigured in both body and soul - in a word, of a horror. At the very most it can maintain us in a state of national impurity and breed some sort of outlandish creature in an environment of disintegration of culture and of darkening spiritual horizons... rent and broken human beings... diseased by ambivalence, consumed by contradictions... living a false and perverted existence by means of surrogates for reality.... a life of deterioration and degeneration, a disgrace to the nation and a disgrace to the individual, a life of pointless struggle and futile suffering, of ambivalence, confusion, and eternal impotence. It is not worth keeping alive.

Socialist & Labor Zionism

Nahman Syrkin ("The Jewish Problem and the Socialist-Jewish State", 1898)

...an exile, who was as bitter as he was weak and as stubborn as he was powerless... assimilation and self-negation produced an unfortunate caricature of the Jew which might have nauseated the non-Jew.... Jewish national existence lacks content... It is not the utopian element that bars great masses of Jews from Zionism, but their servility and passiveness, ...inner poverty and emptiness.... The Jew is small, ugly, servile, and debased when he forgets and denies his great character.

Aaron David Gordon ("People and Labor", 1911; "Some Observations", 1911; "Our Tasks Ahead", 1920; in Ze'ev Sternhell, *The Founding Myths of Israel*, p.48)

We are a people without a country, without a national language, without a living culture... What are we seeking in Palestine? Is it not that which we can never find elsewhere - the fresh milk of a healthy people's culture? ...We seek to create a vital culture out of which the cream of a higher culture can easily be evolved.

Whoever seeks national rebirth and a full life as a Jew must give up the life of the Galut.... Every one of us is required to refashion himself so that the Galut Jew within him becomes a truly emancipated Jew; so that the unnatural, defective, splintered person within him may be changed into a natural wholesome human being who is true to himself.

Jewish life in the Diaspora... an inanimate existence, lacking in national creativity (and, from the point of view of genuine personality, also lacking in individual creativity).... a ruinously constricted and shrunken form; having no living source of spontaneous vitality...

...we are parasites not only in an economic sense, but in spirit, in thought, in poetry, in literature, and in our virtues, our ideals, our higher human aspirations.

Joseph Hayyim Brenner ("Self-Criticism", 1914)

...we live. True, but what is our life worth? We have no inheritance. Each generation gives nothing of its own to its successor.... Everything we know about our lives tells us that there are only masses of Jews who live biologically, like ants, but a living Jewish people in any sociological sense, a people each generation of which adds a new stratus to what preceded it and each part of which is united with the other - such a people hardly exists any longer.... our very life has become pathological.... We have to start all over again, to lay down a new cornerstone. But who will do that? Can we do it, with our sick character? This is the question.

Berl Katzenelson ("Revolution and Tradition", 1934)

We have rebelled against rootlessness and middlemanship [...] servility and cultural poverty...

David Ben Gurion (Speech to youth in Haifa, 1944)

Galut means dependence - material, political, spiritual, cultural, and intellectual dependence - because we are aliens, a minority, bereft of a homeland, rootless... Dependence is not merely political or economic; it is also moral, cultural, and intellectual, and it affects every limb and nerve of the body, every conscious and subconscious act.

Orthodox Religious Zionism

Note: Other major figures in religious/spiritual zionism are in the sections on "Mainstream" and Progressive zionism (Hess, Ha-Am, Schechter, Kaplan, Heschel); Kook falls into no other category, and has been influential on a wide range of zionist thinkers.

Abraham Kook (from *Orot*, compiled 1942 from writings 1910-30)

Jewish original creativity, whether in the realm of ideas or in the arena of daily life and action, is impossible except in Eretz Israel.... In gentile lands the imagination is dim, clouded with darkness and shadowed with unholiness, and it cannot serve as the vessel for the outpouring of the Divine Light... even reason cannot shine in its truest glory outside the Holy Land.

Jewry in the Diaspora has no real foundation and lives only by the power of a vision and by the memory of our glory... Diaspora Jewry is therefore disintegrating at an alarming rate, and there is no hope for it... We have turned our back on physical life, the development of the senses, and all that is involved in the tangible reality of the flesh, because we have fallen prey to lowly fears, and have lacked faith in the holiness of the Land.

Revisionist Zionism

Ze'ev Jabotinsky

(Speech to the British Royal Commission on Palestine, 1938)

Three generations of Jewish thinkers and Zionists [...] have given much thought to analyzing the Jewish position and have come to the conclusion that the cause of our suffering is the very fact of the Diaspora...

(from "Ideology of Betar" in *This Is Betar*, available on archive.org)

...the Jews today are neither normal nor healthy, and life in the Diaspora affects the intelligent upbringing of normal and healthy citizens.... the Jews became accustomed... to disorder and disorganization, to negligence, both in social and personal life.... Life in the Diaspora has greatly weakened many of our soundest normal instincts.

(on Hebrew pronunciation, in *Language In Time of Revolution*, pp.160-1)

The tune of the ghetto is ugly not only because of its weeping tone which stirs unpleasant memories in us: it is also ugly objectively, ugly in the scientific sense - ugly as all superfluous or exaggerated efforts.... That sick frenzy, which we also suffer from in our social life, is also the result of the Diaspora - an abundance of forces with no field and no outlet for the repressed storm except to explode in a bowl of soup - the "singsong" of ghetto speech is nothing but an echo of this national disease....

[We must] bring our pronunciation as close as possible to the concept of the beauty of sound prevalent in Europe... closer to the "correct" pronunciation, to the ancient sound of our language as spoken by our ancient forefathers than is the pronunciation that imitates the Arabic gutturals; let alone the slovenly pronunciation, lacking any line or rule or taste, with which we jargoned [Harshav: i.e. Yiddishized] our speech and defiled our language, one of the most splendid and noble languages in the world, to the point of a noise without variation or character.

Progressive Zionism, Bi-National Zionism, & other Zionist 'Countercurrents'

Moses Hess ("Rome and Jerusalem", 1862)

...my nationality, which is inseparably connected with the ancestral heritage and the memories of the Holy Land and the Eternal City... creativity must come from within, from the seminal power of the living idea of the Jewish nationality and our historic religion.... It is "only after the extinction of the national life of the people, which molded the religious norms as greatly as it was molded by them," that these forms have assumed a rigid form, but this rigidity will disappear as soon as the extinct national life will reawaken... all political and social progress must necessarily be preceded by national independence.

Ahad Ha-Am ("The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem", 1897; "The Negation of the Diaspora", 1909)

Judaism... can no longer tolerate the Galut form which it had to take on... it seeks to return to its historic center where it will be able to live a life developing in a natural way, to bring its powers to play in every department of human culture... wherein its spirit will find pure expression and develop in all its aspects to the highest degree of perfection of which it is capable.

...the sort of exiguous living-space that might perhaps suffice for the infant toddlings of a nation of yesterday cannot provide elbow-room for the cultural life of the "eternal people"... national autonomy in the Diaspora cannot give us the possibility of a full and complete national life... our national life in the Diaspora must be strengthened. But that object... can be attained only by the creation of a fixed center for our national life in the land of its birth.

Judah Magnes ("Like All the Nations?", 1930)

...the Land is one of the chief means, if not the chief means, of revivifying and deepening the people and the Torah....] Palestine can help this people to understand itself, to give an account of itself, to an intensification of its culture, a deepening of its philosophy, a renewal of its religion.... it helps us as no other means does to lay bare our soul, to get down deep into the sources of our being...

Martin Buber ("Hebrew Humanism", 1942)

...every thoughtful Zionist realizes that our character is distorted in many ways, that we are out of joint, and expect the new life in our own land... to set us straight and make us whole once more.

Mordechai Kaplan ("The Future of the American Jew", 1948)

Culture and socioeconomic life are so closely interrelated that it is difficult for Diaspora Jewry to create new Jewish cultural values... in the Diaspora we Jews lack the spirit of dedication that goes with our people's renaissance in Eretz Israel. We are without the magic power that comes with the spoken and creative Hebrew word. We are far from the land where the Jewish spirit is being reborn.

...two standards of normality for Jewish life; one standard for Eretz Israel, where Jewish life can be lived out fully as a complete civilization that provides those who live by it with all the elements of life necessary to their self-fulfillment and happiness; and a second standard for democratic countries like the United States, where they must... find their moral and spiritual security elsewhere.

Contemporary U.S. Progressive Zionism & Post-Zionism

Henry Siegman (in Alisa Solomon & Tony Kushner's *Wrestling with Zion*, p.115, 1988)
...narrow nationalistic and religious fundamentalism... [embodied by political parties of] the so-called "national camp"... is a Zionism of the diaspora, of an uncertain, unproud, unfree people.

Susanna Heschel (in *Wrestling with Zion*, pp.294-5, 2003)
...an imaginative place of spirit... our Zionism. The Jewish fundamentalism of the Diaspora hijacked its principles and substituted a fanatical claim to the land rooted in a profound racism.

Caryn Aviv & David Schneer (in their *New Jews*, p.xvi, 2005)
This book suggests the end of diaspora because the majority of Jews in the United States, Russia, Germany and elsewhere... see themselves at home, not pining for a Promised Land.

Note: In contrast, here are some of Aviv and Schneer's interviewees' own understandings of their lives, as quoted in the book: Lawrence Schimel, from the U.S., living in France, plans "to stay right where I am" as a commitment to "construct our Jewish identities closer to home and embrace our diaspora identity." Ilan Sheinfeld, from Israel, "seeks solace and refuge in 'the diaspora,' where he finds his 'homeland.'"

