H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Melvin I. Urofsky. *American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. xv + 538 pp. ISBN 978-0-585-33995-5.

Reviewed by Peter S. Margolis (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)
Published on H-Judaic (August, 1997)

Symbiosis and Synthesis

American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust is a monument to the interplay between the Zionism of America and that of Europe, resulting in the creation of a thoroughly American movement with worldwide influence. Urofsky credits the unique character of the American variant to Louis D. Brandeis, who translated the imported European ideology into a variety of American progressive reform. This was the cause of many internecine political struggles and much misunderstanding, and continues to fog the relationship between Israeli and American Jews.

The First World War decimated European Zionism at the precise moment when the need for a haven for Jews had never been greater. When American Jewry was called upon to fill the organizational vacuum, it could field only a bankrupt, divided, and ineffective Zionist movement. Brandeis was approached to serve as a sort of figure-head Herzl: a wealthy and assimilated Jewish brahmin who, it was hoped, would grant the movement access to the pocketbooks of his peers.

What the Zionists got was, in today's jargon, a new paradigm: a Zionism for the Jew who would never live in Palestine, yet would sacrifice both time and treasure to make it possible for others to do so. Long on philanthropy and short on ideology, Brandeis nevertheless was well aware that a Jewish state was the unstated goal of any form of Zionism. Urofsky writes: "In time, American Jews did become the financial backbone of Zionism and gave heavily to create and maintain a Jewish state, but European and Palestinian Jews could never admit that their brethren in the United States had other things to offer besides cash" (p. 113).

Those "other things" included responsible and accurate disbursement of funds, an emphasis on practical, concrete tasks, and a guiding commitment to social justice. It was a program guaranteed to put the Americans on a collision course with European Zionists. The latter saw marginal Jews substituting an essentially non-Jewish American progressivism for their ignorance of Jewish culture. As proof, the Europeans pointed to the unwillingness of their American counterparts to make Zionism the central element in their lives. Chaim Weizmann, for example, had immediately relinquished his chair at the Manchester University when offered leadership of the European movement; by contrast, Brandeis never seriously considered giving Zionism primacy over his Supreme Court appointment.

The Europeans failed to appreciate that American Zionists were fighting on a front uniquely their own. In order for Zionism to succeed in America, Urofsky maintains, it had to decisively counter Reform charges of dual loyalty. Zionists needed "a positive approach portraying Zionism as a fulfillment of obligation and Zionist work as the natural extension of Jewish and American ideals" (p. 115). Only by exemplifying what he considered the best of Americanism could Brandeis hope to attract to Zionism Jews who had struggled mightily to establish themselves in America.

The result was a sharp contrast with the visceral *yiddishkeit* and messianic overtones of Zionism in Europe: a Zionism with no detectable cultural program, ignorant of Hebrew, disinterested in philosophizing, prone to somnambulence in the absence of external stimuli, yet superbly capable of rising to meet the needs of any crisis. The ebb and flow of American Zionist membership rolls reflected Jewish fortunes worldwide and the ecomonic situation at home; in parallel ran the ongoing clash of the Zionist exemplars Weizmann and Brandeis and their respective followings through the 1920s and 1930s. Urofsky amply documents the seminal conferences, the bitter arguments, the wounded egos, the ultimatums and compromises, the forming and re-forming of factions, the charges and counter-charges slung back and forth between menˆ and a few womenˆ striving to ameliorate the Jewish situation according to their own lights.

Serious friction between the American and European

Zionists leaders was precipitated by the reorganization of the Zionist Organization of America in 1918. Brandeis presented his plan at the ZOA convention in Pittsburgh on June 25, 1918, the first major Zionist gathering following the Balfour Declaration and the capture of Jerusalem. His Pittsburgh Plarform virtually equated Zionism with the parameters of American social reform, ignoring the religious sentiments, nationalism, and Hebraic cultural issues so vital to the European Zionists.

The disparate conceptions of Zionism inevitably led to a clash of titans between Weizmann and Brandeis in an acrimonious schism in 1921. Urofsky summarizes what seemed at the time to be unbridgeable differences as follows:

By de-emphasizing Jewish nationalism and a distinctive Jewish culture in favor of concentrating on rebuilding Palestine by fiscally conservative methods, Brandeis "made Zionism acceptable to American Jewry his emphasis on practical work in the re-building of Palestine gave American Jews the concrete task they needed to transform a Zionist philosophy into terms relevant to them" (p. 297).

On the other hand, Weizmann "tapped a reservoir closed to the rational approach of the American leadership Weizmann's messianic outlook, his near-mystical approach to restoration" (p. 298) linked Zionism organically to the common psychological and historical experience of the Jews.

Unable by virtue of temperament to see that the movement needed both the rationalism of Brandeis and the emotionalism of Weizmann, the two split the movement, to be reunited only in response to progressively more severe crises, beginning with Arab riots and culminating in the Holocaust. Inevitably, a synthesis took place. Weizmann's expanded Jewish Agency in the 1920s, designed to attract funds from non-Zionists, was decidedly Brandeisian both in its pragmatism and its financial accountability. And the deterioration of the Jewish condition overseas lent an urgency to the need for a Jewish homeland that contributed to the return of the Brandeis faction in 1930. But rather than vindication, the Brandeisists found that "the great depression had cut the financial ground from under their feet at the same time that foreign affairs forced a radical rethinking of Zionist policy" (p. 371).

That rethinking grew out of the British repudiation of the Balfour Declaration in the face of Arab rejection, coinciding with Hitler's rise to power. It became clear that neither Britain nor the United States would do anything substantial to rescue European Jews from the impending Nazi onslaught. The British applied their policy of appeasement to Palestine as they did to Czechoslovakia; the United States, with isolationist pressures at home, was unwilling to antagonize the British, seeing them as the first bulwark against Nazism.

With the world's democracies effectively paralyzed and European Jewry abandoned to a fate that would exceed anything previously imaginable, a process of radicalization took place in the American Zionist movement. From a Depression-era low of 13,000 members, the roster of the ZOA grew to 46,000 in 1941 as Brandeisian pragmatism was harnessed to try to save European Jewry by raising funds for some sort of practical work. America's entry into the war in December of 1941 removed the impediment of isolationism from the American Zionist demand that more must be done for European Jewry. The frustration of helplessness gradually crystallized around a single point: where in the past American Zionists could hope for a Jewish place of refuge under the British Mandate for Palestine, opinion now galvanized around the unequivocal need for a Jewish state.

That radicalization effectively bridged long-simmering ideological rivalries and eradicated most remaining non-Zionist sentiments. It found official expression at the Biltmore conference in New York in May of 1942. In what would become known as the Biltmore Declaration, the assembled Zionist delegates unanimously rejected British policy and demanded that "Palestine be established as a Jewish Commonwealth integrated in the structure of the new democratic world."

Urofsky sees this as a new beginning for American Zionism, the conclusion of the uneasy symbiosis with the European movement, and a Hegelian synthesis of the two: "The Brandeisists taught the Eastern Europeans how to rebuild Zion utilizing American techniqueŝand laid down as a cardinal rule that only by being American could Zionism succeed in this country. In turn, the eastern Europeans taught that Zionism had to be something more than men, money, and discipline, that it had to involve the heart as well as the mind" (p. 428).

The writing of history is itself an historical act: in discussing an aspect of the past, the historian illuminates the spirit and concerns of his own moment. Urofsky's thesis is both convincing and thoroughly supported, with over 80 pages of notes and bibliographical materials. More than that, the re-issue of *American Zionism* to coincide with the centenary of Zionism is compelling in a very contemporary sense. The State of Israel, while better established and more secure than its founders could have envisioned, is fighting for its inner life in a perilous strug-

gle between the polarized ideologies of secularism and religious fundamentalism. Perhaps the practical genius American Zionism will once again contribute to a synthesis, this time one that can stimulate the emergence of Jewish pluralism in Israel.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Peter S. Margolis. Review of Urofsky, Melvin I., *American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust.* H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. August, 1997.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1246

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.