Prelude: The Background of Spiritual Zionism

Eliezer Schweid will be remembered to posterity as the voice and conscience of spiritual Zionism (especially its Gordonian variant) in the age of the fulfillment of the State and the onset of postmodernism.

To shed light on this characterization, I will first provide a historical sketch to situate “spiritual Zionism” within the panorama of modern Jewish ideological movements. Jewish thought has always presented a perpetual dialectic of universalistic and particularist themes and tendencies. In the modern period, the pioneers of modern Judaism—thinkers such as Moses Mendelssohn, Abraham Geiger, and Samson Raphael Hirsch—first responded to the Western Enlightenment, a universalistic movement within modern Western thought, by emphasizing the universalistic themes of Judaism, in order to justify Judaism’s existence in the modern world. In effect, their philosophies were a continuation of the medieval Jewish-Christian disputation in modern guise, arguing that Judaism was perhaps the highest representation of the universal monotheistic religion at the heart of Western culture, or at the very least a worthy exemplar of it. Thus, for them the task of Jewish philosophy was to articulate the worldview of the Jewish religion in terms that were intellectually respectable by the standards of the Western philosophical tradition. This task assumed a common intellectual consensus: that all discussants agreed that some form of the Western biblical monotheistic religion was normative, and that Jewish existence was defined religiously as adherence to the Jewish religion, which was a variety of Western biblical monotheistic religion.

The rise of scientific positivism and nationalism in the mid-nineteenth century threatened to render this whole line of argument obsolete. If Christians were no longer Christian, if the new outlooks no longer even had to genuflect to Christianity as the dominant opinion of mankind, then what did it mean for a young Jew, educated in the progressive ideological climate of the age, to be Jewish? If Christianity itself—and with it, the old Jewish-Christian debate—was rendered obsolete in the age of Darwin, Spencer, and Marx, what task was left for Jewish philosophy?
During this period, political ideologies arose, partly to fill the gap left by the retreat of religion. In Central Europe, Germany and Italy strove to overcome political fragmentation and forge united nation-states. In Eastern Europe, the national minorities within the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires—Poles, Czechs, Magyars, Ukrainians, Serbs, etc.—strove to advance their cultural and political interests.

Meanwhile, the rise of modern, secular anti-Semitism dramatized the fact that even in the age of the decline of religion, there was something stubbornly persistent about the fact of personal and group identities—Jewish or otherwise—that resisted obsolescence. The Damascus Affair of 1840, the rise of German anti-Semitic parties from the 1870s onward, the pogroms of 1881–1904 in Russia, the Dreyfus Affair in France (1894–1910)—all these put the promises of the Enlightenment-Emancipation project vis-à-vis European Jewry into question.

Gradually during this period, Jewish thinkers and groups started to articulate a theory of secular national Jewish existence as a response to the secularization of Western outlook, the rise of Western nationalism, and the renewal of anti-Jewish feeling. Moses Hess’s *Rome and Jerusalem* (1860), Leon Pinsker’s *Auto-Emancipation* (1882), the activities of Ḥovevei Zion (1880s–90s), the essays of Aḥad Ha-Am (pen-name of Asher Ginzberg, 1856–1927), and Theodor Herzl’s founding of the World Zionist Congress (1897–) are landmarks in the emergence of a secular definition of Jewish existence on a national basis. To these should be added Simon Dubnow’s *Letters on Old and New Judaism* (1910), formulating a theory of “Diaspora nationalism”—a Jewish national existence without Zion as a center.

Among the Zionist thinkers, Aḥad Ha-Am stands out as articulating not only an ad hoc program for the immediate solution of the practical problems of Jewry (“the problem of the Jews”), but a comprehensive theory of Jewish existence to offer a rationale for Jewish living in place of the traditional religious Jewish outlook, for those who no longer found it viable (“the problem of Judaism”). His thought marks the starting-point of the variant of Zionist thought that would be called “spiritual Zionism.” Though its immediate practical agenda came from particularistic concerns, its broader philosophy drew on the whole historical Jewish experience, including the universalistic values in the Jewish tradition. Even if traditional religious Judaism was no longer intellectually convincing to Jews of a secular, scientific outlook, there was much in the traditional Jewish legacy that could be adopted in a humanistic vein, consonant with modern humanistic values but in a distinctively Jewish key.