Stephen S. Wise and Golda Meir: Zionism, Israel, and American Power in the Twentieth Century

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In his seminal study, *The Idea of the Jewish State* (1969), the historian Ben Halpern observes: “Israel, the Jewish state, is, of course, the child of Zionism.” Situating Zionism in the context of other modern nationalist struggles, Halpern argues that Jewish nationalism, notwithstanding its particular and even peculiar characteristics, is something of a cousin to other ethnic forms of national expression that arose in the mid- to late nineteenth century. The campaign for Jewish statehood, he further explains, was not only dependent on a variety of objective conditions and factors, but also on the capacity of emerging leaders to navigate a generally precarious and hostile global arena. The latter fundamental political reality, Jehuda Reinharz argues, has, since Theodor Herzl, prompted Zionism’s strategy of forging a necessary link to a great power. It has also shaped the “historical dimensions” of the Zionist movement, the Yishuv (the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine), and contemporary Israeli society, while imbuing relations with the “great powers” with “a quasi-ideological significance.” Though Britain played a dominant role in Zionist policy making by the eve of World War I, and thereafter controlled Palestine until 1947, in this period the United States assumed an increasingly significant role in determining Zionism’s trajectory. In due course, as David Biale observes, the Zionist cause “transformed the nature of American Jewish politics,” and after the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948, “precisely because Israel [was] forced to become a major military power, American Jews [became] a direct party to superpower geopolitics” in the Middle East.

Building on the foregoing important and useful observations, the present study reconsiders the cases of two towering historical figures who straddled the pre- and post-state periods: Stephen S. Wise (1874–1949) and Golda Meir (1898–1978). Wise, America’s dominant Jewish and Zionist leader in the 1930s

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and 1940s, and Meir, Israel’s fourth prime minister, provide excellent opportunities to focus on how two political leaders responded to twentieth-century crises that threatened Jewish survival, while highlighting the critical role of the United States and American power in shaping Zionist and Israeli history.

A few working assumptions provide the analytic framework and context for this study. First, in many respects, Wise and Meir personified the mix of ethnic consciousness, liberalism, and Zionism so central to twentieth-century Jewish life in the West. That is, they represent a mindset and sensibility that became normative in both America and Palestine/Israel in the mid- to late twentieth century. Second, as case studies in leadership, Wise and Meir illustrate the tectonic shift in modern Jewish history and Jewish consciousness from powerlessness to sovereignty. Each played a pivotal role in the evolving relationship of Zionism, and later Israel, to American Jewry and the United States. Third, by comparing Wise and Meir, it is possible to raise useful questions about the possibilities and limitations of pre- and post-state leadership in Jewish life and Israeli policy making vis-à-vis American power.

1 Origins and Upbringing

Though separated by a generation and products of disparate cultural experiences, Stephen S. Wise and Golda Meir were steeped in compatible social and political philosophies. Their strikingly similar worldviews stemmed from the braided quality of their American immigrant upbringing. Wise was born in Hapsburgian Budapest, immigrated to New York City with his family as an infant, and was raised in Manhattan’s middle-class Lexington Avenue “ghetto,” which was populated by German-speaking Jews of central European ancestry. Meir was born in Kiev on the eve of tsarist Russia’s implosion, endured poverty, pogroms, and the arrest of a sibling, and as a child immigrated to Milwaukee, where her family lived in “straitened, but steadily improving” working-class conditions. Both Wise and Meir Americanized swiftly and enjoyed access to a variety of educational opportunities.

As a young man, Wise traveled to Vienna, where he apprenticed himself to and was ordained by Adolf Jellinek, the city’s chief rabbi and renowned preacher. Jellinek’s liberal religious views, engagement in Jewish-Christian