



What Was Zionism?

Reconstructing a Maligned Idea

This course of study examines the idea of Zionism from its ancient sources to the establishment of the State of Israel and its aftermath. We begin with the promise and purpose of the Jews as a people rooted in a land yet forced into exile. Although it never lay fully dormant, the importance of Jewish nationhood reclaims the attention of Jews and others in the 19th century, as life in exile becomes an existential threat. How to defuse that threat emerges as the key question of Zionism. Is the rise of modern nationalism a providential answer? Is the nation-state a political answer? Is a renaissance of Hebraic spirit a cultural answer? What does it mean to reawaken as a nation after centuries of political slumber? Is there any other answer to the Jewish question?

The essays, memoirs, action programs, and philosophical reflections, which are selected for this course of study, reveal how some of the main and most intellectually vital thinkers of Zionism until 1948 answered and debated the questions above. They provide a portrait of what the idea of Zionism was, is, and may yet be.

Week 1: Ancient Sources and Modern Dilemmas

*Selections from the **Torah**, **Talmud**, and the Jewish-Greek historian **Josephus** convey the central ideas of the promise, purpose, and peoplehood of the Jews, as well as their connection to the land of Israel. **Yehuda haLevi**'s classic poem, with commentary by **Franz Rosenzweig**, reveals that the ancient sources of Zionism never ceased to animate Jews. **Leo Strauss** defines the modern dilemmas that caused Jews to awaken as a nation, even while he doubts that Zionism is their definitive answer.*

Sel. fm Torah, Talmud, and Josephus (c. 36–100), pp. 1–5

Yehuda haLevi (c. 1075–1141), “Between East and West” (commentary by Franz Rosenzweig), pp. 234–35

Leo Strauss (1899–1973), “Why We Remain Jews” (1962), pp. 2–17

Week 2: Nationalism in a Jewish Key

Eliezer Ben-Yehuda shows how the emergence of nationalism among the minority nations of Europe inspired visions of a secular Jewish nationalism. **Moses Hess** argues that a kind of ethical nationalism is a providential answer to the Jewish problem.

Moses Hess (1812–1875), sel. fm *The Rebirth of Israel: Rome and Jerusalem: The Last National Question* (1862), pp. 119–30

Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858–1922), *A Dream Come True* (1917–18), Chaps. 1–2, pp. 15–27

Week 3: A State?

Theodor Herzl lays out the definitive case for political Zionism and the need for a state.

Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), *The Jewish State* (1896), pp. 69–157

Week 4: Or a Center?

Ahad Haam argues the shortcomings of political Zionism, identifying practical problems with its execution and the need for a cultural renaissance to complement it.

Ahad Haam (Asher Ginsberg) (1856–1927)

- “The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem” (1897), pp. 262–69
- “The Negation of the Diaspora” (1909), pp. 270–77

Week 5: Between Atheism and Messianism

Yosef Haim Brenner provides a vision of Zionism divorced from any religious sentiment. **Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook** puts forth a deeply religious, even mystical, Zionist vision, while affirming the importance of secular Zionism.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935)

- Sel. fm *Orot* (1920), pp. 253–59
- “The Souls of the World of Chaos” (1913), pp. 256–58
- Letter on Other Religions and Secular Zionists (1918), pp. 75–79

Yosef Haim Brenner (1881–1921), “Self-Criticism” (1914), pp. 307–12

Week 6: From Slaughter to Self-Defense

Hayyim Nahman Bialik captures the horrific violence against Jews in Europe and denounces the weakness of Jews in fighting back. **Vladimir “Ze’ev” Jabotinsky** clearly and dispassionately assesses the present and future dangers faced by Jews in exile and in the land of Israel, and the necessity of self-defense.

Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934), “The City of Slaughter” (1904), pp. 733–43

Vladimir “Ze’ev” Jabotinsky (1880–1940)

- “Thou Shalt Not Wear *Sha’atnez*” (1929), pp. 141–44
- “Trumpeldor’s Anniversary” (1928), pp. 1–4
- “The Iron Wall” (1923), pp. 1–5

Week 7: American Zionism—a Contradiction in Terms?

Hillel Halkin argues that the logic of Jewish history compels Jews to make their life in the State of Israel. **Charles Krauthammer** warns of the dangers of neglecting America Jewry in light of the Jewish return to Israel.

Hillel Halkin (b. 1939), *Letters to an American Jewish Friend* (1977), Chap. 1, pp. 1–2, 14–28

Charles Krauthammer (1950–2018), “At Last, Zion” (1998), pp. 1–9