Ahad Ha-'Am
and Hebrew National Culture:
Realist or Utopianist?

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I

On 26 November 1917, after a board meeting of the Zionist Executive in London, at which Ze'ev Jabotinsky's motion was accepted by a vote of 10-4, Chaim Weizmann turned to Shmuel Tolkovsky and said that Ahad Ha-'Am would certainly now go to his room and prepare a new "Truth from Eretz Israel."[1] This sarcastic remark revealed that Weizmann saw Ahad Ha-'Am's skepticism, pessimistic realism, extreme caution, and inability to see the revolutionary dimension of historical events manifest in his restraint toward the singular political achievement of Zionist diplomacy, the Balfour Declaration. Instead of seeing a new horizon opening before him, Ahad Ha-'Am saw only difficulties and limitations.

In the discussion at the board meeting, three weeks after the Balfour Declaration, Ahad Ha-'Am, fearful of the new "Herzlian messianism," warned against being swept up in waves of enthusiasm.[2] Zionist policy, he advised, must be modest and tactful. It must not demand what it does not justly deserve, even if England wishes to grant it, for this would cause great difficulties at the peace conference.[3] Ahad Ha-'Am opposed the demand to continue maintaining the Jewish Legion in Eretz Israel, not only because of his opposition in principle to "militarism," but also because of his fear that the presence of the brigade would provoke acts of violence on the part of the Arabs and damage the Zionist position in the international arena. In other words, he proposed sober, "realistic" consideration. Neither Jabotinsky nor Weizmann shared his views, hence Weizmann's comment that Ahad Ha-'Am would write a polemic accusing Zionist policy of exaggerating and of lacking realism because it presented extreme demands without comprehending the nature of historical reality, and that ultimately it would damage the Zionist cause. Ahad Ha-'Am, it seems, preached caution and "minimalism" without comprehending the significance of the times. This may be seen as criticism of the "intellectual" who lacks a sense of history, preaching moderation and realism even during times of revolution. Historically, this was certainly a valid criticism,

since Ahad Ha-'Am did in fact foresee what was coming, and understood that Zionist policy had limited potential and should not be received with overenthusiasm. But in the context of 1917 he was wrong.

One way to understand Ahad Ha-'Am's approach in that unique period is by making a historical assessment of the possibilities and limitations of the direction of Zionism at the time. But there is also a model that views Ahad Ha-'Am's caution as an expression of his critical intellectual nature, with which he distinguished, as a critical intellectual must, between desire and reality. Because of this, Ahad Ha-'Am has been stereotyped as the intellectual whose criticism is constructive, coming as it does from identifying with goals and aiming at their success. This is not criticism that initiates, inspires, or motivates. Ahad-Ha'Am was not a "prophet" intellectual, required by a national movement in times of dramatic change. He was not a politically "creative" intellectual. He was skeptical and disillusioned in Herzl's day, when wishes were far from reality, and he continued as such during the dramatic upheaval in the international position of Zionism, shaping his response to the events of that time in accordance with his evolutionist beliefs.

This short political episode in the life of Ahad Ha-'Am coincided with the epoch-making Zionist political activity in London. Since he lacked the attributes of statesmanship or leadership, he took a more "natural" course, combining his national and cultural thought with his role as an initiator of culture and a critic of cultural trends.

II

I began with this episode because in his article Vital is not concerned with Ahad Ha-'Am as an initiator of culture, but rather as a prototype of the intellectual who meddles in politics. Vital sees Ahad Ha-'Am as almost the only intellectual (not an ideologue or theoretician) to whose fundamental teaching we may appeal. He claims that (1) Ahad Ha-'Am's teachings are the most relevant Zionist teachings for our day, and (2) that they were prophetic, more than the writings of Herzl, Jabotinsky, Ben-Gurion, and others.

The second claim is based more on impression or wishful thinking than on hard evidence. The only way to establish it is to present a sampling of references to the various bodies of "Zionist Writings" to prove that Ahad Ha-'Am is in fact quoted more than the others, that he was a greater inspiration for arguments, assumptions, and conclusions. It seems to me that references to Herzl and Jabotinsky, Ben-Gurion and Brenner, to mention only a few, are more numerous and more frequent. Ahad Ha-'Am's place in the collective consciousness cannot be estimated according to the number of academic or political essays written

about him, but rather on the basis of the frequency of his appearance in public discussion in general.

On 6 February 1987, in commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the death of Asher Ginzberg, the literary supplement of *Yedi'ot Aharonot* conducted a survey about attitudes toward Ahad Ha-'Am and his position in contemporary Israeli culture ("Ahad Ha-'Am Is Not Only the Name of a Street"). The survey found that his central articles are no longer studied in high schools; that interest in him is decreasing; and that his writings, which exist in an old and incomplete edition, are no longer available. The only two academic enterprises concerned with him — the biography by Yosef Goldstein and the complete edition of his work, edited by Shulamit Laskov — are not yet complete.[4] But these are academic undertakings. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the *Yedi'ot* survey one response was: "If you look today at the schools, the academies, and the newspapers, you see that there is very little left of his legacy. His place is preserved in the history of Hebrew culture in the nineteenth century." In other words, Ahad Ha-'Am belongs to his own time (and of course to the first two decades of the twentieth century as well), but he is not relevant for our day.

If the spirit of Ahad Ha-'Am can be located in historical consciousness, it is primarily in current debates on the essence and vitality of secular Jewish nationalism and secular Hebrew culture. If Vital thinks the writings of Ahad Ha-'Am are the only ones of his period that don't smell anachronistic, most of those polled in the survey did not think that his teachings have "eternal value." A few went even further, deeming them anachronisms that proposed opinions that had outlived their time. If anyone found them relevant, it was not because of a system of thought that could serve as an intellectual and cultural foundation, but rather because of Ahad Ha-'Am's talent in indicating latent problems. He was a sober observer, it is argued, who had a good grasp of difficulties, weaknesses, and dilemmas. He did not succeed in constructing a complete and valid model of "Jewish identity," but he did point to the internal problems of the emerging Jewish identity. According to Vital, Ahad Ha-'Am was "an extraordinary observer, an exceptionally severe critic." But to be an intellectual leader, one's solutions must be valid and must apply. Thus, to take issue with Vital, while Ahad Ha-'Am may have been outstanding as an "intellectual," he did not propose an "alternative policy."

Shlomo Avineri also portrays Ahad Ha-'Am as a sober realist, a balanced and restrained man who did not flinch from pointing out mistakes, a man who was not deterred by excessive optimism. Ahad Ha-'Am, says Avineri, taught that a national movement can continue to exist even with self-criticism, that, in fact, self-criticism is essential to its existence. Furthermore, Ahad Ha-'Am's reading of the future was more "realistic" than that of others, since he understood that the Diaspora would continue to exist and that the nature of relations between the

"center" in Eretz Israel and "centers" in the Diaspora (hence the question of the nature of the "center in Eretz Israel") would continue to be the fundamental historical issue for a long time.[5] Clearly, the attitude to Ahad Ha-'Am emanates from the attitude of his portrayers to the political life of Israel of the last generation. This distorts the historical perspective. Those who fear the "messianic" trends in current Israeli politics find in Ahad Ha-'Am an appropriate guide. But is it really possible to draw a parallel between Ahad Ha-'Am's criticism of Herzl's policies or Baron Rothschild's settlements and current criticism of, for example, *Gush Emunim* or Israeli politics after 1967? Ahad Ha-'Am did not criticize a state or an established and successful movement, but rather a movement in its infancy that had not yet achieved a position in history, a movement that would not have succeeded without sweeping "prophetic" and "messianic" rhetoric. There is a fundamental difference between penetrating criticism at the outset and criticism several generations later. It was not difficult to discern the essential weaknesses of *Hibbat Zion* or the flaws of Baron Rothschild's settlements. But Ahad Ha-'Am exposed objective weaknesses without proposing realistic alternatives, and he himself, as we know, demanded that his impressions of Eretz Israel be studied again in the wake of the criticism and debate they aroused.[6]

The most famous of his articles, "This Is Not the Way," has been studied for almost a hundred years, since it was first published in *Ha-Melitz* on 13 March 1889. Other articles, e.g., "Truth from Eretz Israel" and "Confusion," which he wrote in the wake of his impressions of Eretz Israel, reflect an evolutionary, idealistic, and elitist position.[7] They are sober, "realistic," and qualitatively different from the optimistic propaganda of the *Hovevei Zion*[8] (even though they were not the only ones to criticize). The articles survey the great change in the position of Eretz Israel in Jewish history from a narrow perspective. Ahad Ha-'Am's criticism of the settlements is one-sided and tendentious, lacking a balanced, detailed, and relevant description of the gray areas. His lack of imagination and his inability to get excited and be impressed often made him seem stolid and sober, but also dry and visionless, able to judge difficult and complex matters only by a strict and rigid standard.

Ahad Ha-'Am did indeed point out essential weaknesses, but the suggestions he had in his bag were flimsy. He did not propose any genuine alternatives. The fact that some of his forecasts did come true has nothing to do with the value and effectiveness of his criticism at the time it was made. In the area of patterns of settlement, as with the area closer to his heart — the building of a new Hebrew culture — Ahad Ha-'Am did not set any basic guidelines or make effective and applicable proposals. His national and cultural response also lacked a system, vacillating as it did between "radicalism" and "conservatism," and being unrealistically enthusiastic about everything concerning the creation of a complete "Hebrew culture."

From the religious point of view Ahad Ha-'Am was a "heretic." From the radical secular point of view, he was a "conservative" and traditionalist.[9] He did indeed vacillate between his principles, on the one hand, and his various cultural proposals and polemics, on the other. His views changed in response to developments within *Hibbat Zion*, the Zionist movement, and the Yishuv in Eretz Israel. Such changeableness in his stand on national and cultural questions cannot be seen only as the result of his being an actively involved politician who responded to changes as a "critical intellectual."[10] His involvement, not only as a man with views and opinions but also as an initiator and leader, did force him to accept ephemeral opinions. But they should not be seen solely as a result of his not being a systematic thinker and writer, but rather a political essayist who offered general answers to pressing contemporary questions. Even a systematic theoretician like Borochov, for example, often modified his position; an essayist and political commentator, by the very nature of his concern, is compelled to change his mind. The deeper reason for Ahad Ha-'Am's vacillation is that his national and cultural world view lacked internal coherence. Ahad Ha-'Am never formulated a firm position on the basic questions, which, as an "intellectual" who discussed such questions broadly and profoundly, he should have done. This may be seen as a flaw in his personality or in his thinking,[11] but it also is representative of the inherent dilemma of secular national thought in general and its conception of culture.

III

Ahad Ha-'Am's national concept wavered between an "objectivist" and a "subjectivist" conception, between "radicalism" and "traditionalist conservatism," between the search for the historical and intellectual common denominator of all the factions in modern Jewry and the salient opposition to and presentation of a complete alternative to "old Jewry." Thus, Ahad Ha-'Am may legitimately be seen as one of the important formulators and creators of secular national thought. Appeals to him are generally designed to legitimize him, since, because of his position in history, he may be seen as a "founding father" of secular nationalism. But, from a historical perspective of more than fifty years, he may also be seen as a pathbreaker, who stood at the crossroads of the history of Judaism,[12] embodying and expressing the internal contradictions and fundamental dilemmas of the "new Judaism." This is indeed Ahad Ha-'Am's double image in Hebrew culture: *a creator of modern "secular Judaism" and a personification of its inner weaknesses.* Ahad Ha-'Am is often portrayed as someone who sought a pragmatic compromise between secular and religious Jews. He clearly understood that the Zionist enterprise would not exist without agreement and cooperation between religious Jews and secular-national Jews. It may be said that throughout his life he aimed at fostering such agreement.[13]

For him, it was the search for a national common denominator. However, his solution could not obscure the fact that he proposed replacing "Torah Judaism" with "natural nationalism." Moreover, this was accompanied by a demand for religious Jews to recognize the historical legitimacy of "natural nationalism," a recognition that could not be expected of them. It was neither the ideology of Bnei Moshe under his leadership nor the educational and cultural enterprise in Eretz Israel that led him to become the "natural-secular" leader and basically an unbeliever. These only emphasized the danger that his natural national idea would become the established ideology of the Yishuv. The Bnei Moshe society was described by Frumkin, in an article entitled "In the Straits" (published in *Ha-Havatzelet* in 1894), as wanting to "tear up the religion of Israel by the roots," led by someone who

> became a heretic and then planted his own orchard and entered it, he and his peers, chopping down the plants planted by the leaders of Israel, saints in Eretz Israel. The triangular thread — Torah, the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He, and Israel — which has bound our nation from our beginnings, was cut by tyranny.[14]

The Hebrew school in Jaffa, the *Sha'ar Zion* library, and the other manifestations of Hebrew culture in the spirit of Ahad Ha-'Am were considered monstrous manifestations of licentiousness. The distinction Ahad Ha-'Am made between religion and nationalism was not acceptable to the religious Jews in any formulation. As for his critics in the "Old Yishuv," there was no essential difference between his perspective and reform. The war declared by the "Old Yishuv" on Ahad Ha-'Am and the Bnei Moshe was, therefore, inevitable — the logical result of an essential division.

Thus, there is some truth in the notion that it was Ahad Ha-'Am's thought and his involvement in Eretz Israel through Bnei Moshe that turned the cultural polarization of the Yishuv in the late nineteenth century into an institutionalized spiritual polarization.[15] Ahad Ha-'Am was hardly a positive figure for religious writers, who in their desire to reveal the emptiness of his claim that cultural life in Israel was based on "national morality" and not religion, criticized him severely for his views. They saw him as a man of his time — a period of crisis and disaster for Judaism — a man who, instead of seeking to renew theology, vainly sought a secular creed. In their view, he limited the image of Judaism, proposing, in the words of Alexander Altmann, "a dry theory of secular nationalism"[16] based on an impotent coupling of nationalism and rationalism. If there is a positive essence in his thought, wrote Altmann, it is in the "spirit of religious faith that is hidden between the lines," that is, in his concepts that have a "conservative-mystical" meaning, maintaining that the "sense of national fate" cannot be clarified and interpreted through rationalist notions. In order to grant Ahad Ha-'Am a touch of the mystic, Altmann grants his notion of the continuity of Jewish existence a "mystical" interpretation. Ahad Ha-'Am's writings were interpreted in the same way by Yitzhak Be'er, according to his own view that

Judaism is a religion of mystical and eschatological enthusiasm, but this simply is not the case.

Ahad Ha-'Am's statements, such as "there is in the spirit of our people something special, even if we do not know what it is that makes it swerve from the smooth path of other nations,"[17] did not, in fact, deviate from the historical tradition of, for example, the German *Aufklaerung.*[18] Ahad Ha-'Am was referring to the inability of the science of history to explain the riddle of birth of national genius, of the individual *genie* of the nation, the force of a consciousness that shapes and interprets the world in its own way or according to the intellectual or spiritual content of "Judaism." In other words, history cannot explain — it can only describe — how the world view of the Jews was created and internalized by them forever, especially when it does not accept revelation and sees human consciousness and the national genuis as the source of faith and values. But history can teach the nature of the *Realgeist,* i.e., as Ranke defined the term, the present and active character of the "spirit" in concrete historical reality. For Ahad Ha-'Am the *Realgeist* of Judaism was not a realization of inner mystical spirits, but of rationalist ethics and an inner sense of moralism.

The cooperation that Ahad Ha-'Am favored between "freethinkers" and the "religious" was a pragmatic partnership, based not on ideological consent but on the desire to preserve national unity. He saw national unity as the essence, the base, and within it, within the broad framework of national culture, he also granted a place and rights to religious faith and existence. Accepting such a concept could come from the religious wing of Zionism only when it was clear beyond any shadow of a doubt that the cultural existence of the Yishuv was determined and shaped by "natural nationalists." The interpretation that assumes that Ahad Ha-'Am expected a renovation of religious law (Halakhah), its revival from its extended "freeze" under the pressure of "life," which, after a long process, would produce a synthesis between religious law and secular culture, is merely an assumption that attributes to Ahad Ha-'Am things he did not say.[19]

Ahad Ha-'Am's thought and activity were a factor and a catalyst in the polarization within *Hibbat Zion* — a polarization that exposed the inherent "Old Yishuv" and Orthodox religious circles was naturally aggravated as a result of the confrontations of the 1890s and of the firm Orthodox opposition to "modernization," "natural nationalism," and "Hebrew culture."[20] Ahad Ha-'Am's activities triggered a shift in the religious-secular debate from the theoretical level to a more concrete one. His common denominator between freethinkers and the religious was a neutral common denominator, not an ideological one. But it also had a function of religion that was totally unacceptable to every kind of observant Jew: "To exalt the heart of the nation and to grant supremacy to all the different winds that blow in the parties of Israel, without interfering much or little in the spirit of the sects."[21]

Ahad Ha-'Am's world view and contemporary events impelled him not only to establish a theory, or theology, of "secular Judaism," but also to support efforts to fill it with genuine concrete content. For this, it was not enough to make "national feeling" the focus and determining factor of the internalized spiritual code of Judaism, manifested in the "national moral." Ahad Ha-'Am was forced to take a clear position regarding the structure and character of the entire national-cultural system. His "organic-traditionalist" concept emerged from his concern about breaking the "organic" intellectual and cultural continuity of Jewish tradition. He called for a "new reading" of Jewish history, but was opposed to radical historicism, especially to the call for a total "change of values," which he regarded as spiritual nihilism. On the other hand, he saw the new Hebrew cultural system as a complete cultural complex. He conceived of "Hebrew education," for example, not only as instruction in Hebrew or "secular subjects," but as instruction in all subjects, including the natural sciences, in a "Hebrew spirit." Attempting to transform "alien wisdom" into a system of "Jewish wisdom," containing all the components of modern secular national culture, a "self-understandable world," as a secular alternative to "old Judaism" or "Torah Judaism," put him in a difficult position. What, for example, does "Hebrew science" mean? Ahad Ha-'Am had definite ideas about how instruction of the Bible in the Hebrew school should be implemented: he called for the preservation of the traditional structure of the Bible and warned against the doctrinal introduction of "biblical criticism." His position on the "Bible controversy" in the Herzliya Gymnasium in 1911 reveals his conservatism.[22] For him, "Hebrew geography" was the geography of Eretz Israel, and "Hebrew" arithmetic was teaching arithmetic through examples taken from modern Palestinian reality. This was the *reductio ad absurdum* of the principle of "Hebrewness," and to validate it Ahad Ha-'Am was forced to use "idealistic" and even "mystical" claims — speaking of the "Hebrew heart," etc. Education and enlightenment were meant to implant in the Hebrew student a "Hebrew heart" or a "new Hebrew heart," thus preserving the organic nature of the "Jewish spirit," even in its new form. It was precisely because his thinking led to a radical change in Jewish history that he was compelled to use "organic" concepts. Positivist that he was, the Zeitgeist prevented him from adopting prevalent positivist arguments regarding "culture" as a necessary result of the natural environment and its characteristics.[23] In his view, "culture" was entirely a creation of consciousness and spirit, independent of environment, for environment is merely the framework that endows spirit with content. The importance of Eretz Israel to the revival of the spirit, aside from its being, of course, the historical place where Jewish consciousness first was shaped, is that it was where the Jewish spirit could develop independently and individually, where it would be able to cope with "the assimilation of foreign culture," without such assimilation damaging its particular cultural identity. Ahad Ha-'Am saw culture not as the sum total of a nation's products, but rather as a metacultural ideal, an absolute and fixed ideal whose source is subjective.

This notion was based on an intuitive, dogmatic, and, in fact, *a priori* assumption of "a full and total system." Therefore, he was able to propose only a basic idea[24] or ideas, but not a general secular philosophy or theory of national culture. This is the first aspect of his Utopian concept of Hebrew national culture. In other words, he was able to formulate culture as an abstract or idealistic principle, but he had no idea of how this principle was to be transformed into reality. He therefore became completely dependent on the idea of the uniqueness of the Jewish spirit (*Volksgeist*). In other words, Ahad Ha-'Am's idealistic concept emphasized the principle of uniqueness, or the national Self (inherent, collective traits), and since he did not consider Judaism to be a "closed culture," or even that it could or should be self-contained, in either the present or the future, he had to establish a firm principle fixing the types of "outside" influences on it and the processes of categorizing and selecting desirable "cultural components" of the new cultural system.

This principle of selfhood assumed the existence of an "individual Jewish spirit" overseeing the processes of absorption of external cultural elements, classifying them by degree of appropriateness to the "unique spirit," and internalizing and digesting them, changing their form and content to fit the "original spirit" and making them an integral part of it. Ahad Ha-'Am did not pay attention to these processes of selection and internalization. Rather, he was immersed in an intellectual effort to locate the essence of the principle. Since he determined that the constituting principle of the Jewish collective self was ethics, he therefore saw ethics as the normative system that could determine what is "originally Jewish" and what is a negative absorption from outside. The Pharisees of the Second Temple period,[25] whom Ahad Ha-'Am considered the most authentic and positive embodiment of Judaism, were not a closed religious group, steeped only in issues of religious law and ritual, rejecting all contact with the surrounding cultural world, as they usually are presented in Christian histories of that period. They were, rather, the creators of original Judaism. They were open to foreign wisdom, but because of the force of their "selfhood" were not swept up by it. They did not assimilate or absorb foreign elements indiscriminately, but were highly selective and discriminating. For Ahad Ha-'Am, the Pharisees were the ideal, a model of original Judaism, which was both open and dynamic. He sought this in the religious Judaism of his own time, but his expectation of finding it was not very high.

Regarding himself as a modern Jewish Pharisee, Ahad Ha-'Am found the internal spiritual code of Judaism in ethics. But he was a direct descendant of the *Haskalah*, and shared the opinion of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* that Jewish culture is a complex of Jewish spiritual and literary creation. Hence, his ideology of the ingathering was not a mere compilation as such of antiquarian literary creations but rather a compilation for the sake of canonization — a compilation embodying the ideal of culture. He thought, for example, that the ethical

behavioral norms in the Bible and Talmud could be taken as obligatory, even without accepting faith as their source. For Ahad Ha-'Am, these ethical norms expressed the "spirit of the nation," and not only were valid without the system of belief but were ranked even higher than the belief itself. But even if the moral aspect is based on a true Jewish spirit, what about the many other components of culture? How and by what criterion is their "national" character determined and shaped? This is the second Utopian aspect of Ahad Ha-'Am's world view; the inability to offer a set of concrete cultural norms (codex) that allow the explicit realization of all forms of culture according to a definite idea.

Ahad Ha-'Am's secular — European, in fact — starting point was camouflaged by traditionalism and idealistic claims of all-inclusive ethics, metahistoric spiritual continuity, and a "Hebrew heart" beating beneath all that. Distant from and alarmed by the radical historicism of his rival M. Y. Berdichevsky, Ahad Ha-'Am and his followers invested a great deal of intellectual effort to locate and fix the characteristic essence of Judaism, that internalized element, that metacultural code that is both formative and eternal. To keep the radical flow from washing everything away, he was forced to set a spiritual-historical factor — or factors — considered as eternal, whether the source was objective or subjective, within the spirit of the nation. Here, more than he was a positivist, Ahad Ha-'Am was a follower of the school of *Voelkerpsychologie*, founded by Moritz Lazarus (a fact not emphasized in studies of his intellectual biography), and saw the embodiment of the Jewish spirit in its full scope and originality, its full individual personality, as possible only within the framework of a national entity, even more, an autonomous national entity. There is not necessarily a contradiction between his positivistic world view and his idealistic one, as his biographers, Simon and Heller, believe.[26] His idealism was stronger and deeper than his positivism and was expressed in his entire system of thought.

Ahad Ha-'Am's idealism is also reflected in the lack of interest he had in and importance he attributed to the socioeconomic context of the rise and crystallization of culture. He understood that a "tempting" cultural milieu influences the culture of the national minority (Jewish, in this case), and that throughout history profound cultural changes had occurred in the various strata of Jewish culture, but there is nothing of value in his writings on the nature of the various mechanisms of culture. When he touches on the issue of "influence," he appears as a preacher, warning against the penetration of "inferior" or "contaminated" culture. He portrays Hebrew culture as a new and comprehensive complex, but also as "elitist" and "pure." His overlooking the social context of culture is particularly noteworthy, since he was well aware of the gap between elitist and popular culture as well as of the disparity between the "genius" embodied in the spiritual elite and the everyday "spirituality" of the general public. Here lies the third Utopian aspect of Ahad Ha-'Am's world view: overlooking the relevance and importance of the social context of culture.

Education was the most fundamental and urgent cultural issue on the Zionist agenda, hence the most controversial. This was because an educational system has the power to establish norms and cultural values. In the case of Hebrew culture it was expected to bear most of the burden of transforming the new national cultural model into a genuine cultural system. Focusing on the educational system diverted attention from other social and cultural spheres, which were more or less influential in the creation of the Yishuv, and it was natural that the educational system would concern children and youth, since the cultural values it expressed — the system of studies, the curriculum, the nature of teaching, etc. — were more "real."[27]

More than once Ahad Ha-'Am decreed that the issue of education was the "cornerstone of the whole thing." Since the educational system was supposed to create and express both the essence and content of education in the Yishuv, "it is impossible for that education to fulfill its obligation by memorizing Hebrew phrases with some superficial and external knowledge of the Bible and of current events." Hebrew education had to be total, not bilingual, because studying in another (European) language not only would create bilingualism but also was essentially anti-national. Ahad Ha-'Am considered education in Hebrew worthy of the name, according to the concept of the "dominant" language, as a complete and total expression of the soul, whereas bilingualism was an expression of anomaly, of the "divided soul."[28] Hebrew education limited to defined areas and general subjects taught in a European language (French or German) must, in his opinion, engender in the hearts of the students

> a sense of contempt and frivolity in relation to their people and its national creations, which look petty and worthless to them, since they know them only in anecdotal form without a unifying a sharp view.[29]

IV

It is doubtful whether Ahad Ha-'Am succeeded in presenting a "unified view," a synthesis of the "positive" elements of "old Judaism in the Hebrew spirit" with the best of European culture. This essential weakness in his thought has been noted, occasionally for either the explicit or tacit purpose of using it to expose the inherent weaknesses of "secular culture" through the "high priest" of "secular nationalism." But there was another weakness in his thought — a weakness that not only was the product of basic assumptions but also of the reality whose defects he perceived (but without, as we have noted, drawing the necessary conclusions for his own thinking). This internal encounter between the creative intellectual and the critical intellectual was the weak link in Ahad Ha-'Am's thought, and raises questions about whether he was a "realistic intellectual" in the context of his time.

Although Ahad Ha-'Am called for the creation of a complete Hebrew educational system, some hasty impressions of schools in the Yishuv at the turn of the century were enough to show him its internal weakness: the Hebrew school had to be both Hebrew and European, but there were not enough trained teachers and informed people in all branches of Judaism and general subjects. There were no teachers who were "cultured in the European sense" who did not "look like a *melamed.*" Still, in his criticism of Belkind's Hebrew school in Jaffa, he thought that culture also prevailed over someone who was not educated in the spirit of an enlightened European nation; in other words, even a teacher who had studied in Russia was an educated and cultured man, no less than one who had studied in a French or German school. The new *Kultura* was not in contradiction to the deep-rooted and total Hebraism of Eretz Israel. The Hebrew school thus was enjoined to provide tangible evidence of such a possibility.

But Ahad Ha-'Am doubted the abilities of the available teachers, just as he doubted whether instruction in all general subjects could be done in Hebrew, given its inherent limitations and "frozenness." He repeatedly criticized the cultural reality in the *moshavot* while completely ignoring the fact that Hebrew culture — which he wanted to be total, original, and independent — was developing in an "artificial" Hebrew environment, in the framework of a Jewish society whose written — and spoken — language was not just Hebrew.[30] In the 1890s, Ahad Ha-'Am wanted to find total Hebrew in the context of a completely non-Hebrew Jewish society in the externally backward cultural environment of Ottoman Eretz Israel. This was Utopian idealism combined with a lack of understanding or consideration of the terms of the sociocultural reality in which the new Jewish Yishuv was developing. In the spirit of the Haskalah, the entire burden fell on the teachers, who were not, in Ahad Ha-'Am's opinion, trained and able to cope with it.

This gap between the model and reality is more apparent if we recall that Ahad Ha-'Am did not consider Hebrew cultural cells in Eretz Israel as autonomous entities, but rather as evidence of the possibility of the Hebrew Revival, as a model and a source of inspiration for cultural revival in the Diaspora. We can therefore understand why he imposed an impossible burden on Hebrew cultural institutions in Eretz Israel, which only helped undermine his own world view. No wonder his critics pointed out that he did not bother to explain the necessary connection between the nature and quality of cultural creation and the society in which it emerged. They thought Ahad Ha-'Am did not actually mean a national Hebrew society, but rather a "Hebrew Yavneh," whose schools would produce a "Torah" for Jewish centers in Diaspora. Ahad Ha-'Am did not seem to be concerned with the fact that Hebrew culture is a function of Hebrew society, not the other way around.

The critical intellectual, therefore, judged the incipient creativity of Hebrew

culture by general, abstract, and elitist yardsticks. Lacking the ability to conform
the ideal and model to reality, his strict criticism and remedies not only could not
create the desired alternative but planted doubt about what had already been done
and what its chances were of success. Ahad Ha-'Am may have scorned his
opponents and critics as fantasizing visionaries (thus earning the title of sober
realist), but his own criticism of reality was not entirely free of a different kind
of "vision and fantasy." The education program he proposed was general; it was
essentially the ideal model of "the Hebrew mold." He mocked the idealists who
rejoiced, as he said, "at the sight of the progress of the national ideal in our day."
He regarded their rejoicing with more than "a drop of bitterness," for he knew
well how hard it would be to achieve the desired aim and that its realization would
depend on "long and hard work for generations to come." Until then, "a few
generations would pass and, in the meantime, who knows if it will not cease by
itself."

However, since he feared that such a process would not necessarily produce a
national culture according to his model, he was quick to judge its various
manifestations harshly. He never freed himself from this internal contradiction,
which shaped his relations to contemporary manifestations. This contradiction
is salient, as we have said, not only in Ahad Ha-'Am's thinking, since "religion"
provided the regulations with a formulated and systematic code of general
instructions for behavior, whereas the "national institution" had a principle, but
not a formulated code. And, because Ahad Ha-'Am saw "culture" as a broad
complex, the lack of such a code was especially prominent. Ahad Ha-'Am
established the principle of Judaism as "secular religion" and "culture" without
a sufficiently profound understanding of what that was.

His solution, therefore, was a "sealing off," like the works of Rabbi Judah
Ha-Nasi, the Rambam, and Rabbi Yosef Karo. The difference is that whereas
they sealed the religious legal developments of generations, Ahad Ha-'Am wanted
to precede his "sealing off" — the formulation of the normative system of culture
— with a pre-existing, articulated Hebrew culture. If Ahad Ha-'Am accused his
opponents of idealism and Utopianism, thus earning the title of "realist," does
he not also deserve to some extent the title of "idealist" and "Utopian" for his
view that the formulation of the model, the creation of the "canonic book," not
as a compulsory codex of laws but as a concentration of all Jewish cultural
creation according to a new conception of the world, could be an alternative? In
promoting the collection "The Treasure of Judaism in its Language" as an
essential and official cultural enterprise, did he not reveal a distance from the real
cultural entity?

Apparently, Ahad Ha-'Am did not recognize the fundamental difference between,
on the one hand, "the ingathering" (kinus), according to a defined principle of
selection, and, on the other, codification, that is, the creation of an internalized

or written code of cultural behavior. It is not surprising that he paid almost no attention to the urgent problems of the crystallization of "political culture," nor to the question of whether political principles should be at the foundation of the new Jewish Yishuv, not simply as a social and cultural cell but as a political and autonomous one as well.

Ahad Ha-'Am's central goal was to prove that a Jew could be a Jew according to natural national sentiment, without his Judaism being dependent on faith and religious worship, and that this Judaism could be exposed to and absorb Western culture. At the same time, he wanted to prove that this "free" national Judaism could offer a special and unique "Jewish" code of behavior and a total national Jewish cultural system, sealed with the seal of cultural independence. This Utopian goal occasionally led him on a path that exposed internal problems of principle and of the encounter with reality. Ahad Ha-'Am serves simultaneously as a "founding father," a guide for traditionalist secular Judaism, but he also symbolizes the internal weaknesses of such a Judaism. His lack of success in creating an ordered theory was an expression of weakness, but it also was evidence of his inability to propose a theory that would not become dogmatic and one-dimensional. In fact, it can even be argued that the Hebrew culture of our age is personified in Ahad Ha-'Am's view of what it would be: an inclusive culture that lacks a compulsory code and unifying entity. It also proves his criticism to be well founded, since the defects he noted at the beginning still exist ninety-six years later, in the kind of pragmatic compromise between "Torah" and "traditionalist nationalism" that he advocated. If he were to write "Truth from Eretz Israel" today, he almost certainly would say "This is not the way," but we cannot know if he would express the opinion that the process should be long and drawn out until the desired cultural mode is created, or whether he would write elegaic and pessimistic comments about what already exists and express his doubts about the future. If, on the one hand, Ahad Ha-'Am lived with a profound sense of the inevitable deep schism between "subjective" and "objective" reality, he also longed to bring down the barrier and merge the two; on the other hand, he applied strict and exaggerated yardsticks to objective reality.

No matter what, when we examine the contribution of the intellectual to the creation or criticism of "culture," we must not ignore the circumstances of the age — the criticism of the 1890s cannot be the criticism of the 1980s.

NOTES

1. This episode is described in Shmuel Tolkovsky, *Zionist Political Diary: London 1915-1919* [in Hebrew], ed. D. Barzilay (Jerusalem, 1981), 236. After Ahad Ha-'Am's first visit to Eretz Israel in 1891 and the publication of his article "Truth from Eretz Israel" in the same year, there was concern among various circles at the time of his second visit in 1893 about what he would write. Ahad Ha-'Am visited Eretz Israel again, in 1900, 1907, and 1912. A comment similar to Weizmann's is in an 1896 letter from Yosef Luria to Leo Motzkin, in which he wrote that Ahad Ha-'Am was an educated and highly knowledgeable man, an ethical man who was intelligent, clever, and practical. His "opportunism" was expressed only in his caution, in his lack of boldness and initiative. See Jehuda Reinharz, *Chaim Weizmann: The Making of a Zionist Leader* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1987), 58-59.

2. As is well known, Ahad Ha-'Am considered Herzl's diplomacy and its underlying approach a flagrant and dangerous manifestation of messianism. See, e.g., his article "In the Traces of the Messiah," in *Writings of Ahad Ha-'Am* [in Hebrew], vol. 4 (Berlin, 1930), 87-90.

3. Tolkovsky, *Diary*, 232-36. Weizmann himself, we should recall, was also a "realist," who offered as the model of Zionist policies required at the time the camel who first stuck his foot into the tent and only afterward was thrust inside.

4. Yosef Goldstein has been diligent in completing the biography of Ahad Ha-'Am, and has already published sections of it. Shulamit Laskov is working on an edition of Ahad Ha-'Am's correspondence, which includes thousands of letters. There is no "Ahad Ha-'Am Institute" to publish an edition of his collected writings (most recent edition, 1961). Nor is there a complete and current bibliography of the many essays written about Ahad Ha-'Am. Even the dates of his birth and death are not official.

5. Shlomo Avineri, *Varieties of Zionist Thought* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1980), 131-41. We must remember that Ahad Ha-'Am did not express himself much on the nature of the future Jewish state, its borders, or other political questions of cardinal importance.

6. The article was considered a pathbreaker, since it made Ahad Ha-'Am a national figure. The centennial of its publication in *Ha-Melitz* was marked last year with several articles in Israeli newspapers.

7. Yosef Goldstein considers "Truth from Eretz Israel" (*Writings*, 1:26-42; "Confusion," 2:43-53; and his reply to his opponents, ibid., 2:54-67) a sober and realistic description of the situation in the settlements, unlike the widespread propaganda of the time. However, in the same period, a great many impressions and critical essays, which were more reasoned and no less harsh, were also published. See Yosef Goldstein, "Ahad Ha-'Am's First Visit to Eretz Israel (1891)" [in Hebrew], *Cathedra* 46 (December 1987): 91-108. Yaacov Kellner explains the elitist nature of Ahad Ha-'Am's demand for a strict selection of the immigrant settlers and discusses its sources and parallels. See Yaacov Kellner, "The Anti-Philanthropic Approach During the First Aliyah," *Cathedra* 10 (January 1979):3-33.

8. For Ahad Ha-'Am's visit and his assessment of the settlements, cf. Shulamit Laskov, "*Hovevei Zion* in Russia: Supporters of the Yishuvim in Eretz Yisrael" [in Hebrew], in Mordechai Eliav, ed., *The First Aliya* 1 (Jerusalem, 1981), 141-77. Ahad Ha-'Am's harsh response to the issue of the national movement and the settlements that emerged from it, as well as the decision of Baron Rothschild to withdraw support from the settlements, is described in detail in Shulamit Laskov, "*Hovevei Zion* Versus Rothschild over the Character of the Yishuv" [in Hebrew], *Zionism* 12 (1987):29-72. In that difficult situation, both the idealists and the realists were required to participate in the delegation that was humiliated by the baron. The "realistic" needs of existence were stronger here than ideological perspective or national pride.

9. "Traditionalism" means a different reading and interpretation of tradition and a new integration of it into the world of ideas and opinions. Ahad Ha-'Am presented a negative example from the

Jacobite revolution, which was unsuccessful in its attempt to create both a new ideology and civil religion. He cited the failure of the revolution to prove not the strength of religion but rather the strength of tradition.

10. "Ahad Ha-'Am is a man of letters and will not be capable of active enterprise," wrote Bernstein Cohen to Motzkin in June 1898. See Yosef Goldstein, "Ahad Ha-'Am and the Zionist Congress Under Herzl's Leadership (1897-1904)" [in Hebrew], *Milet: Everyman's University Studies in Jewish History and Culture* 2 (Tel Aviv, 1985):336. Cf. also the brief discussion of the criticism of Herzl, ibid., 381-86. On Ahad Ha-'Am's criticism of Herzl, see David Vital's *The Origins of Zionism* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1978), 146-55. In his obituary of M. L. Lilienblum (1910), Ahad Ha-'Am wrote what may be seen as an outstanding characterization of himself. Even when Lilienblum was steeped in practical work, he remained "what he had to be, according to his nature, his education, and the course of his life: the intellectual who sees in this life only his thoughts." See Ahad Ha-'Am, *Writings*, 4:184.

11. Yosef Eliahu Heller, "The Spiritual and Intellectual Image of Ahad Ha-'Am" [in Hebrew], *Melila* (Manchester, 1955):241-64. Heller presents a psychological analysis of Ahad Ha-'Am, who was aware of his prophetic function but feared it and retreated from it.

12. Gershon Weiler exaggerates in regarding him as the "official ideologue of the State of Israel" and the "official ideologue of perplexed Israeli nationalism" (significantly inspired by Baruch Kurzweil's famous criticism of Ahad Ha-'Am, whose principles Weiler accepts but whose conclusion he naturally does not agree with). Cf. Gershon Weiler, "The Nineteenth Century as a Watershed of Jewish History" [in Hebrew], *Keshet* (Summer 1968):245-47.

13. Eliezer Schweid, *Judaism and Secular Culture* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1981), 14. On the debate between Ahad Ha-'Am and the traditionalists, see, inter alia, Y. Salmon, "The Struggle for the Public Opinion of the Orthodox Community in Eastern Europe Concerning Jewish Nationalism, 1894-1896" [in Hebrew], in E. Etkes and Y. Salmon, eds., *Studies in the History of Jewish Society in the Middle Ages and the Modern Period* (Jerusalem, 1980), 330-68.

15. For the "freethinkers," whose spokesman Ahad Ha-'Am was considered to be (thus the devil of heresy), cf. A. R. Malachi, "The Yishuv Against Ahad Ha-'Am" [in Hebrew], in *Studies in the History of the Old Yishuv* (Tel Aviv, 1977), 346-81.

16. Alexander Altmann, "In Appreciation of Ahad Ha-'Am" [in Hebrew], in *Faces of Judaism* (Tel Aviv, 1983), 155-59.

17. Altmann sees this as a proof of Ahad Ha-'Am 's "repentance" from "rationalism" to faith. But this is not an issue of "repentance," and these statements of Ahad Ha-'Am (in his article "On Two Chapters") reflect the conventional position of modern Jewish national historiography.

18. It is well known that the German *Aufklaerung* conceived of history as an area where "a diversity of human wills express themselves," i.e., as an arena of activity of "the collective human force of will," or of the "desire of the will" of the collective, and that it viewed Jewish history as a singular history. Altmann blurred the fact that Ahad Ha-'Am spoke of the *Volksgeist*, which emerges from within, not from a transcendental discovery.

19. Nowhere did Ahad Ha-'Am say that religious law was to be the normative system of the new Jewish society; he distinguished "faith," "tradition," and "religious law."

20. There is a great deal of research on this subject; for our purpose, cf. J. Salmon, "Polarization in the Jewish Yishuv in Eretz Israel in the Early 1890s" [in Hebrew], *Cathedra* 12 (July 1979):3-31. Salmon emphasizes the role of Ahad Ha-'Am and Bnei Moshe in polarizing the Yishuv in those years.

21. Compare his perspective with that of Herzl, his greatest opponent (as he saw it). Herzl granted "religion" a neutral and Utopian function.

22. On Ahad Ha-'Am's visit in 1911 and his criticism of the system of Bible education, see the chapter "The War of the Bible," in Baron Ben Yehuda, *Story of the Herzliya Gymnasia* (Tel Aviv, 1970), 76-111. Here, Ahad Ha-'Am revealed a flagrantly "conservative" position, but for reasons of national traditionalism, not religious fundamentalism. He revealed a completely different conservative side in his intervention in the debate on the famous article of Y. H. Brenner of

November 1910. See Yosef Goldstein, "Ahad Ha-'Am: Transition in Religious Perspectives within Jewish Nationalist Ideology," in *Transition and Change in Modern Jewish History: Essays Presented in Honor of Shmuel Ettinger* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1987).

23. Despite his "positivism," Ahad Ha-'Am was not caught by the "materialistic positivism" so widespread in his day. For him, the "spirit of the nation" was a history of forces of consciousness and soul, not of the influence of "external factors." In this, he was not original, but merely expressed prevalent concepts.

24. Ehud Lus, *Parallels Meet: Religion and Nationalism in the Early Zionist Movement* (1882-1904) (Tel Aviv, 1985), 216-19. There are, of course, many other essays on this issue. Cf., e.g., Arye Rubinstein, "*Kultura* in the Thought of Ahad Ha-'Am" [in Hebrew], *Melila* (1950):289-310

25. According to Ahad Ha-'Am, the Pharisees did not express the legalistic and ritualistic aspect of Judaism but rather organic Judaism. Here, too, his position reflected the view of Pharisaism in the new national historiography.

26. Cf. Heller, "The Spiritual and Intellectual Image of Ahad Ha-'Am"; Arye Simon and Yosef Eliahu Heller, *Ahad Ha-'Am: The Man, His Work and His Thought* [in Hebrew] (Manchester, 1955).

27. The abstract debate about *Kultura* became a concrete debate about "real culture" as soon as the educational system in the Yishuv became part of the national settlement enterprise. See Yehoshua Kamiel, *Continuity and Change: Old Yishuv and New Yishuv During the First and Second Aliyah* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1981), 46-59; Rachel Elboim-Dror, *Hebrew Education in Eretz Israel* 1 [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1986).

28. It was H. N. Bialik who expressed this position especially. In contrast, Ahad Ha-'Am essentially valued the written language (literature) and high literature, and thus did not relate entirely negatively to the fact that, even in Eretz Israel, the Jews would have a spoken language other than Hebrew or would even learn an additional language as a "language of higher education."

29. In other words, discussion of the values of the nation (Bible, history, literature, etc.) must be in Hebrew.

30. Cf. Binyamin Harshav, "Essay on the Revival of the Hebrew Language" [in Hebrew], *Alpayim* 2 (1990):9-54.

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