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Zionist Organization of America speech. 13 September 1957.

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ZOA MEETING FRIDAY, September 13, 1957

The task of Zionism is two-fold -- to make a state which Jews could inhabit and to make Jews who could inhabit the state. The first has been done -- the second must go on.

The task of Zionism is to revitalize and deepen Jewish consciousness; to replace fear with pride; to give common purpose to communal energy; to normalize the Jew; to resist conscious assimilation and to offer a positive Judaism as preventive against unconscious drifting; to disseminate culture and language. All this is in line with the dictum that there can be no Jewish State unless there are Jews.

It might be said that the making of Jews is the duty of the synagogue. There the consciousness should be developed; the sense of destiny expounded; the tie between people and God made deeper; the unity of the people hammered home; the culture and folk-lore passed from generation to generation. All this is true and every rabbi whose view takes him beyond the mere mechanical recital of prayer undoubtedly utilizes his synagogue pulpit and school for the teaching of these over-arching themes.

But all through our glorious and rich history there have been movements outside of and in addition to the synagogue which rose to stir the hearts and souls of the people toward regeneration. Whether the Maccabees of Hellenistic days -- Bar Kochba in the time of Rome -- the Baal Shem after the dark times of

Chmelnitski -- or Herzl in our own period -- there have always been men who created movements designed to lift the eyes and elevate the minds above the abuses and disabilities of a particular era. Whether these men were generals or mystics their purpose was always the same -- to give the Jewish people a sense of nobility and purpose even at the bitterest moments. Thus the darkness was transcended in a burst of creative enthusiasm which distracted attention from the temporary distress and focused again on the eternal.

Our eternal truths are few and every authentic movement of Jewish regeneration such as Zionism has embraced them. We believe in our worthwhileness as a people, which is a way of saying that we believe our continued corporate existence to be of value to us and to the world. We believe that our religious genius has provided us and all mankind with insights into the meaning of the individual life and the meaning of the universe. We believe that history has a goal and that progress toward it is man's inevitable lot in spite of all his fumbling and apparent perversities. We are therefore optimistic, convinced liberals, oriented toward the rule of law, with our sights set on the improvement of society and the self fulfillment of each individual on earth. This makes of us universalists in the finest sense of that term.

We are at the same time particularists of a most intense nature, for we believe every broad purpose is to be served by our survival as a separate and distinct corporate entity. This passionate conviction of separation in no way vitiates our fondest universal aspirations, for we believe that we best serve these universal goals by remaining strongly and firmly on the scene of history in a posture of vigor and health. This combination is pure prophetic Judaism -- sounded early in our career by Isaiah and Amos.

Our fierce particularism has always manifested itself in movements which took us back to or reminded us of the Holy Land as the one sure focus around which we could always gather for renewal of belief. So long as the Jew lived in, or made a pilgrimage to, or prayed for, or paid a tax to Eretz Israel, he was firmly and inaffably tied to his rock, his source, his atomic pile which yielded the energy for continued survival in the face of whatever incredibly difficult external circumstances. The son of Israel linked to the land of Israel was in eternal contact with his God and his fellow Jew. This is the essential meaning of the theological statement, "God, Israel and Torah are one."

This is the framework which has existed from that first magic moment in ~~Israel~~ Sinai when the people was formed, down to the present moment when the descendants of more than a hundred generations have made a new covenant

with the future. It is in this framework that the Zionist movement was born to give new expression to the ancient and broken bond between people and land.

Incredibly -- it was done. Two short generations moved swiftly from idea and theory to the state of fact and reality. What agonies of sweat and argumentation practicals vs. politicals, Uganda vs. Palestine, etc. -- what treasures were poured, great philanthropists, Rothschild, de Hirsch, Montefiore, Warburg, Rosenwald, great national funds, billions -- what blood was spilled, Jewish legion, Arab riots, war, raids, Haganah. Sixty years ago, he pointed out, few believed Herzl's prophesy that in fifty years the world would see an Israel reborn, and they never dreamed we would be rejoicing in the 10th anniversary of a Jewish state. Yet it is here and done, miraculously, too near and close yet to be fully understood or appreciated -- nevertheless done and proudly so -- and happy are we who shared in the doing.

Where do we stand now, really?

What has been done?

What remains -- and what is our task?

There are two main currents of problems -- ideological and practical, and I shall deal only with the latter, but let me say simply this is about the former before leaving it. We have created a State but have not yet begun to solve the deep and perennial problems of Jewish existence, nor even begun to touch upon the deepest meanings of the State itself. Let no one be deluded

in this regard. There is yet much hard debate to be endured and much energetic theorizing to be employed before even the roughest outlines can be laid down. Will the state become the spiritual center of which Ahad Ha-am dreamed? Will new life-giving spiritual forms emerge in which the whole Diaspora can be bathed and massaged and anointed? Will the culture and civilization of the State be consciously guided in the direction of ancient Bible and modern science which B.G. once described as the twin pillars upon which Israel must rest if she is to fulfill the role we cherish for her? Will the eternal unity of the Jewish people be made stronger by the presence of the state as a healing and welding influence linking Sephardim and Ashkenazim, or will the yawning chasm grow between Israelis and Jews so that the twin shall some day never meet except as friendly strangers? Will chauvinism and militarism take the young hero of Israel down strange paths so that he will become a thick-muscled peasant, sturdy and independent, but gradually unrecognizable and a different Jew from his more sensitive brethren in Moscow and New York? What is the Galut? What is Jewish freedom? What is the true path toward the Messianic goal? These and a thousand similar questions occupy the minds of those of us who are concerned about Jewish fate and future. They must be answered in a thousand ideological debates such as the one recently held

in Jerusalem, which should be repeated often, not just in the Holy City, but also in all the places on earth where the Holy People live scattered.

I list this fact of our as yet unsolved ideology simply to emphasize the proposition that there is yet a vast area of labor for the Zionist movement in the ideological and spiritual sphere. The sixty years which have passed since the first Congress and the almost ten which have passed since the founding of the State have been no-where near enough to give anyone the assurance that the sharp questions raised by our emergence into the modern world are satisfactorily resolved. Let the Zionist theoreticians continue to labor for we have yet much to learn of our new horizons.

I would turn instead to the second great set of problems still facing us -- namely, the practical problems which are perhaps easier to grapple with, for their framework is more specific and therefore more limited. Simply put, the practical problem is this -- we have created a State, but not yet staffed it with people sufficient to give it final strength; nor endowed it with industry sufficient to produce goods and wealth in quantity; nor added to its agriculture sufficient to take all the stones from the land and give bread to all; nor laced its length with road and wire and rail and cable sufficient so that communication and travel can be had with normal ease; nor yet dug its mines or explored its air or opened its archaeological treasures

or fished its sea. All of this we have started -- none of this have we even begun to bring to realization and the most crying need of all is the first I said, for this deals with people.

Of all the practical problems the most important has to do with people. Israel needs Jews, but perhaps more significantly there are Jews who need Israel, and of all the sacred tasks man can imagine, none surpasses the duty of saving a life. So long as there is a single Jew anywhere on this wide world who is in trouble or in need or in danger, whose body and soul can be rescued from oppression or neglect, whose very life can be redeemed -- so long as there is any one such Jew anywhere, let not a single one of us in this room ever again draw an easy breath if he has done everything personally possible to perform the mitzvah of Pidyon Shevuyim -- redemption of the captives. If we fail in this, we fail in the very essence of our striving, for of all the complex strands of motivation which brought the State into being none was more prominent than the thesis that in Israel at least every weary Jewish head would find a home. It is exemplified in the very first law of the new commonwealth -- the law of Return.

This matter of life-saving is particularly acute in the 20th century, and that may be one reason why the age-old dream of Zion's restoration suddenly came to fruition exactly when it did. For the 20th century is one of the most terrible ones in Jewish history, absolutely unique in respect of the savagery of Hitler, comparable only to a few others in terms of what I call the geographic shift. As to the uniqueness of Hitler, there is nothing to be said. Rage and passion shall never leave me when I think back to that assault on civilization which took Jews as its bloody appetizer, which caught Christianity without the moral power to stop it. The stigmata of guilt for the 6 million will appear for a long time on the western soul, and we can only cry our tears for our dead. Instead of dwelling on this, think for a moment of what I mean by the geographic shift, for which there are only a few other analogies.

The center of influence of the Jewish world has shifted radically in the 20th century. Eastern and Central Europe, once the very epicenter of Jewish life, are no more, and their place has now been taken by Israel and America. Such shifts have occurred only rarely. Remember the story of the first century? When the Roman legions tramped through the Temple ruins Palestine fell and the focus of influence shifted eastward and

for a thousand years Babylonia was the place where Jewish life grew and flourished. In the academies of Sura and Pumbeditha the scholars read and wrote and walked and talked their deathless words -- so that we got Talmud and prayerbook and ideas and beliefs to keep us warm in the cold world. There were Jews living elsewhere, but Babylonia was the center of the stage.

Then the pendulum swung westward again and a new era arose in Spain, called the golden age, as indeed it was for half a thousand years, while the poets sang and the philosophers worked. There were Jews elsewhere, but historically speaking, our eyes were on ibn Gabriol and Jehuda Halevi and Maimonides. The focus was in the mountains and valleys of Iberia, so reminiscent of the Upper Galilee. Then that too ended, suddenly or inevitably, depending on how you read history, and the Jews were scattered in a dramatic sprinkling throughout a dozen lands -- but already a new focus was developing -- the shift was eastward again. The period of the dominance of Eastern and Central Europe began, and for yet another 500 years the stage was to be held by Warsaw and Moscow and Berlin. Oh how we relish that period and romanticize it and feel our inner glow about it -- for it is within the living memory of many of us -- or at least we have heard our fathers tell about it -- the shtetl and the stiebel; the crooked streets of ghetto slums and

the lovely melodies of the Shabbos, great yeshivas and pauper-proud bridegrooms waiting to be snapped up; the fights between Litvaks and Galitzianer, Chasidim and Misnagdim; the grinding poverty of a Polish village, the haughty pride of enlightened Maskilim, the dignity and grandeur of Frankfurt orthodoxy, the eager searchings of a Berlin Hochschule. Who can encompass in words the rich sprawling vibrant dangerous life of ten million Jews living between the Rhine and Volga. This was the reservoir for Yiddish literature and religious Judaism and mysticism and Chassidism and reform and Haskalah and Jewish capitalism and socialist idealism and modern Zionism and what have you. It's all there in the "World of Sholem Aleichim", and a few other books.

And now it is no more -- for the geographic shift has occurred again in the 20th century -- this time both eastward and westward -- this time to America and Israel -- so that for the first time we have two strong poles, not one, each with enormous Jewish weight. The furnaces roared and the gas chambers hissed and the snowy wastes of Siberia all took their toll as a great Jewry collapsed.

But just before this happened the Jewish God of history, if you will, or sociological imperative, if you prefer a different vocabulary -- they are really the same thing metaphysically -- prepared the seed-bed for the two

new foci. Jews streamed to the American shore in very large numbers just around the turn of the century, and Jews streamed to Palestine in very small numbers at the same time. In both places they made their impact, so that there was built up here this fabulous community of 5 million, free, rich, eager and willing to help -- and there was built up there a fantastic yeshuv, strong, dedicated, open-armed, ready to embrace those who came in need.

As the black fires of hell burned down in 1945 and those European Jews who were alive stumbled out into the daylight, the other two Jewries were thus already prepared by the mysterious workings of history to be ready and available to help the victims.

American and Palestinian Jews made solemn compact that they would share responsibility, each doing his part, and on that stage of mercy there was played out the drama wherein the American Jews rose to heights of generosity and the Palestinian Jews rose to heights of almost messianic glory, creating a state and fighting for it, so that Jewish pain could be healed and Jewish honor restored. Through our great aching desire to relieve the pain of the Hitler-wounded Jew, the worst pain we have had since Rome, we rebuilt in a spasm of creative effort the state that Rome destroyed. Pain beget birth.

But there is yet one unfinished item, and that is the fate and

future of the Jewry of Eastern Europe. If Western Jewry and Israel are the two enormous pillars around which the next centuries of Jewish life will evolve and flourish, it must be remembered that not all which lies between is wasteland. Six million are dead -- but three million still live, in Poland, Hungary, Rumania, Russia, and these must never be forgotten. For forty years in the Soviet Union Jews have not ceased being Jews -- nor have they relinquished the spiritual ties which bind them to either one or both of the twin pillars. Since a year ago when the frequency of visitors to Russia increased, we have had all manner of reports which reveal the thoughts and feelings of Russian Jewry. The American rabbis who visited last summer, the Israeli football team which played before 100,000 in the Dynamo Stadium in Moscow, the young people who recently returned from the Soviet Youth Festival, have all reported the eagerness with which Russian Jews made contact and sought information from their western and Israeli brethren. True, there was fear and some holding back and some doctrinaire disinterest -- it would not be natural otherwise. But through all the welter of impressions, one hard fact emerges -- large numbers of Russian Jews apparently think of themselves as Jews, feel themselves to be Jews, have made efforts to retain Jewish practices, Hebrew language, and would apparently emigrate to Israel in large numbers if

given the opportunity.

This hard fact represents a threshold upon which we now stand, with some trembling and with some awe. No one knows whether the political opportunities will materialize for a free and open emigration of East European Jews to Israel or the West. One can only express a feeling, and my feeling is that the womb of history is due to give birth. I think we stand on the threshold of a reuniting of East European Jewry with the two other great pillars. This may not occur next month or next year, but history has its dynamic and the moment seems to be approaching.

Should this occur the geographic shift will spiral toward its climax for this century and many to come. Eastern Jewry will have been distributed between the West and Israel and then the great creative energy of that segment of the Jewish people will once again be released into the twin mainstreams of the Jewish future. Oh happy day!

But what a staggering task this will impose upon us! The UJA will have to go forward to another decade of hard work, and the Jews of America will have to become possessed of sufficient historic vision to enable them to remain firmly behind the UJA with enough financial support so that the job can at least be partially approximated.

The UJA has been in the thick of the historic climates which mark the course of the past two decades. Since its first united campaign in 1939, at the opening of the last war, until this moment, on the eve of its 20th consecutive campaign, the UJA has been the instrument to carry out the will of American Jews in every crisis -- to bring relief behind Hitler's fortress, to resettle Jews everywhere in the world that a visa could be obtained, to feed the hungry in the camps, and above all else, to build the farms and settlements and homes of Israel. Sometime in the months ahead a person will step down from a plane or a ship and will be told that he is the one millionth Jewish refugee to be welcomed to the ancestral land of freedom. Through all this the UJA has been the strong arm of those who have given so far more than one billion dollars that these lives should be saved and the beloved land built.

With such a record behind it, the UJA must face the future, even such a tremendously challenging future as lies beyond the threshold of the east, which we are just beginning to cross. I said we stood on this threshold with trembling and with awe. The awe is obvious -- a portion of our people long locked away might be able to rejoin us. The trembling also is clear -- this will cost another great treasure. But there is no need to

be afraid. A great and deathless people is in the midst of its finest period of re-birth and re-creation. Strongly focussed in two free areas of the world, one of which is the magic soil itself, the people will gather its wounded to its breast, find the treasure to pay for the rebuilding, and rephrase the matchless ideals into new forms for man's future.

Sixty generations ago a people was torn from its home -- and wandered forth dazed and bleeding, but determined to live.

Sixty years ago a movement began to restore that people to its home, by every possible political and legal guarantee.

The people lives -- the land lives -- and neither shall die -- for the people and the land bear the imperishable imprint of God's truth.

Am Yisroel Chai!