

Central Conference of American Rabbis Resolution, July 1897

Resolved, That we totally disapprove of any attempt for the establishment of a Jewish state. Such attempts show misunderstanding of Israel's mission, which from the narrow political and rational field has been expanded to the promotion among the whole human race of the broad and universalistic religion first proclaimed by the Jewish prophets. Such attempts do not benefit, but infinitely harm our Jewish brethren where they are still persecuted, by confirming the assertion of their enemies that the Jews are foreigners in the countries in which they are at home, and of which they are everywhere the most loyal and patriotic citizens.

We reaffirm that the object of Judaism is not political nor national but spiritual, and addresses itself to the continuous growth of peace, justice, and love in the human race, to a messianic time when all men will recognize that they form "one great brotherhood" for the establishment of God's kingdom on Earth.

Central Conference of American Rabbis Neutrality Resolution, 1935

Whereas, At certain foregoing conventions of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, resolutions have been adopted in opposition to Zionism, and

Whereas, We are persuaded that acceptance or rejection of the ZIONist program should be left to the determination of the individual members of the Conference themselves, therefore

Be It Resolved, That the Central Conference of American Rabbis takes no official stand on the subject of Zionism; and be it further

Resolved, That in keeping with its oft-announced intentions, the Central Conference of American Rabbis will continue to co-operate in the upbuilding of Palestine, and in the economic, cultural, and particularly spiritual tasks confronting the growing and evolving Jewish community there.

Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism (Columbus Platform), 1937

... In all lands where our people live, they assume and seek to share loyally the full duties and responsibilities of citizenship and to create seats of Jewish knowledge and religion. In the rehabilitation of Palestine, the land hallowed by memories and hopes, we behold the promise of renewed life for many of our brethren. We affirm the obligation of all Jewry to aid in its upbuilding as a Jewish homeland by endeavoring to make it not only a haven of refuge for the oppressed but also a center of Jewish culture and spiritual life.

5.30—ISAAC MAYER WISE'S REJECTION OF ZIONISM, CENTRAL CONFERENCE
OF AMERICAN RABBIS, JULY 6, 1897

Although American Jews of both Eastern European and Central European origin backed the Zionism movement, others viewed it as an assault on their status as patriotic Americans. Isaac Mayer Wise, who emigrated from Bohemia in 1847, helped found the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Hebrew Union College, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis, for which he served as president. Wise rejected Zionism, as did most Reform Jews at that time. In 1897, the same year that Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) led the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, Wise pressed his anti-Zionist thinking on his colleagues at their annual Central Conference of American Rabbis meeting in Montreal.

... I consider it my duty also, Rev. colleagues, to call your attention to the political projects engaging now a considerable portion of our co-religionists in Europe and also in our country, especially in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and other large cities. I refer, of course, to the so-called "Friends of Zion," *Chovaveh Zion*, who revive among certain classes of people the political national sentiment of olden times, and turn the mission of Israel from the province of religion and humanity to the narrow political and national field, where Judaism loses its universal and sanctified ground and its historical signification.

[...]

Idealists and religious phantasts took hold upon this situation, and made of it a general restoration of the Jews and their returning to the holy land, although the greatest number of Jewish citizens in the countries where they enjoy all civil and political rights loudly disavowed any such beliefs, hopes or wishes; yet the persecuted and expatriated from Russia and such other countries preached their new doctrine loudly and emphatically, and found advocates and friends also among Christians, more so even than among Jews. At last politicians seized the

situation, and one of them, called Dr. [Theodor] Herzl, proposed to establish and constitute at once the Jewish State in Palestine [although Herzl's *Judenstaat* pamphlet had never mentioned Palestine], worked the scheme, and placed it so eloquently before the Jewish communities that the utopian idea of a Jewish state took hold of many minds, and a congress of all "Friends of Zion" was convoked to the city of Munich, to meet there in August next. [Actually they met in Basel, Switzerland.]

However, all this agitation on the other side of the ocean concerned us very little. We are perfectly satisfied with our political and social position. It can make no difference to us in what form our fellow citizens worship God, or what particular spot of the earth's surface we occupy. We want freedom, equality, justice and equity to reign and govern the community in which we live. This we possess in such fullness, that no State whatever could improve on it. That new Messianic movement over the ocean does not concern us at all. But the same expatriated, persecuted and outrageously wronged people came in large numbers also to us, and they, being still imbued with their home ideas, ideals and beliefs, voiced these projects among themselves and their friends so loudly and so vehemently, that the subject was discussed rather passionately in public meetings, and some petty politicians of that class are appointed as delegates, we learn, to the Basle Congress, and in each of those meetings, as reported by the press, so and so many rabbis advocated those political schemes, and compromised in the eyes of the public the whole of American Judaism as the phantastic dupes of a thoughtless Utopia, which is to us a *fata morgana*, a momentary inebriation of morbid minds, and a prostitution of Israel's holy cause to a madman's dance of unsound politicians. . . .

Source: As printed in *JAW*, 382-83. From *Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook*, 7 (1897-98): x-xii.

5.31—MOSES DESCENDING WITH THE TEN COMMANDMENTS INTO YOSEMITE VALLEY, CONGREGATION SHBRITH ISRAEL, SAN FRANCISCO, 1905

For many Jews, the impulse to leave their American communities and immigrate to Palestine never took hold. They considered the United States their homeland and did not respond to the Zionist movement that was gaining strength in Eastern Europe and Ottoman Palestine. In San Francisco, Sherith

Israel congregants expressed their love for American Jewish life by commissioning a 1905 stained glass sanctuary window that depicted Moses descending with the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai into California's famed Yosemite Valley.



Source: Congregation Sherith Israel, San Francisco, Calif.
Autry Museum of Western Heritage, Los Angeles, Calif.
Ben Ailes, photographer; used by permission of the
photographer.

5.32—LOUIS BRANDEIS, "THE JEWISH PROBLEM: HOW TO SOLVE IT"
(EXCERPT), APRIL 25, 1915

The American Zionist movement enjoyed dramatic growth when famed jurist and eventual U.S. Supreme Court associate justice Louis Brandeis agreed to become its leader in 1914. While Brandeis positioned Zionism as an important antidote to European antisemitism, he also crafted a version of American Zionism that addressed, and for many resolved, the dual loyalty conflict that plagued calls for Jewish nationalism in the United States. At a time when the first groups of Eastern European Jews immigrated to Palestine, American Jews worried that support for the Zionist cause would cast a shadow on their reputations as loyal Americans. Brandeis, in a 1915 speech delivered to a group of American Reform rabbis, articulated what would later be known as the Brandeisian Synthesis, combining the nationalist aspirations of Jews with the ideals of the Founding Fathers. According to Brandeis, American Jews could support the Zionist cause without leaving the United States and without compromising their civic status as loyal Americans.

ZIONISM AND PATRIOTISM.

Let no American imagine that Zionism is inconsistent with Patriotism. Multiple loyalties are objectionable only if they are inconsistent. A man is a better citizen of the United States for being also a loyal citizen of his state, and of his city; for being loyal to his family, and to his profession or trade; for being loyal to his college or his lodge. Every Irish American who contributed towards advancing home rule was a better man and a better American for the sacrifice he made. Every American Jew who aids in advancing the Jewish settlement in Palestine, though he feels that neither he nor his descendants will ever live there, will likewise be a better man and a better American for doing so.

Note what [British historian Robert] Seton-Watson says:

"America is full of nationalities which, while accepting with enthusiasm their new American citizenship, nevertheless look to some centre in the Old World as the source and inspiration of their national culture and traditions. The most typical instance is the feeling of the American Jew for Palestine which may well become a focus for his déclassé kinsmen in other parts of the world." (*The War and Democracy*, p. 290.)

There is no inconsistency between loyalty to America and loyalty to Jewry. The Jewish spirit, the product of our religion and experiences, is essentially modern and essentially American. Not since the destruction of the Temple have the Jews in spirit and in ideals been so fully in harmony with the noblest aspirations of the country in which they lived.

America's fundamental law seeks to make real the brotherhood of man. That brotherhood became the Jewish fundamental law more than twenty-five hundred years ago. America's insistent demand in the twentieth century is for social justice. That also has been the Jews' striving for ages. Their affliction as well as their religion has prepared the Jews for effective democracy. Persecution broadened their sympathies. It trained them in patient endurance, in self-control, and in sacrifice. It made them think as well as suffer. It deepened the passion for righteousness.

Indeed, loyalty to America demands rather that each American Jew become a Zionist. For only through the ennobling effect of its strivings can we develop the best that is in us and give to this country the full benefit of our great inheritance. The Jewish spirit, so long preserved, the character developed by so many centuries of sacrifice, should be preserved and developed further, so that in America as elsewhere the sons of the race may in future live lives and do deeds worthy of their ancestors.

[...]

OUR DUTY.

Since the Jewish Problem is single and universal, the Jews of every country should strive for its solution. But the duty resting upon us of America is especially insistent. We number about 3,000,000, which is more than one fifth of all the Jews in the world, a number larger than comprised within any other country except the Russian Empire. We are representative of all the Jews in the world; for we are composed of immigrants, or descendants of immigrants coming from every other country, or district. We include persons from every section of society, and of every shade of religious belief. We are ourselves free from civil or political disabilities; and are relatively prosperous. Our fellow-Americans are infused with a high and generous spirit, which insures approval of our struggle to ennoble, liberate, and otherwise improve the condition of an important part of the human race; and their innate manliness makes them sympathize particularly with our efforts at self-help. America's

detachment from the old world problem relieves us from suspicions and embarrassments frequently attending the activities of Jews of rival European countries. And a conflict between American interests or ambitions and Jewish aims is not conceivable. Our loyalty to America can never be questioned.

Let us therefore lead, earnestly, courageously and joyously, in the struggle for liberation. Let us all recognize that we Jews are a distinctive nationality of which every Jew, whatever his country, his station or shade of belief, is necessarily a member. Let us insist that the struggle for liberty shall not cease until equality of opportunity is accorded to nationalities as to individuals. Let us insist also that full equality of opportunity cannot be obtained by Jews until we, like members of other nationalities, shall have the option of living elsewhere or of returning to the land of our forefathers.

Source: Louis D. Brandeis School of Law, Louisville, Ky.
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