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because they are America's own birth-right—which is also to say, they are a part of our national interest. Somewhere in this middle region between idealism and realism lies the security

and prosperity of liberal democracies everywhere.

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*Adam Wolfson is Executive Editor of The Public Interest.*

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## After Virtue

**Mark A. Raider**

**The Emergence  
Of American Zionism**

*New York University Press,  
296 pages.*

**Reviewed by Gil Troy**

For over a century now, American Zionism has been a movement riddled with contradictions. Too comfortable to crave a homeland other than the United States, by 1948 most American Jews nonetheless championed the establishment of a Jewish state. Even as they became successful, committed capitalists, still they bankrolled what was billed as a socialist paradise in Israel. And although most Israelis have defined themselves and their state in secular terms, most American Jews

have made support for Israel a central aspect of their religion. In short, American Jews have devoted untold resources—emotional, political, financial—to fulfilling a dream which in many ways contradicts the lives they themselves have lived.

Recently, a number of authors have tried to explain just how this anomalous hybrid developed, including Michael Berkowitz in *Western Jewry and the Zionist Project, 1914-1933* (1997) and Rafael Medoff in *Zionism and the Arabs: An American Jewish Dilemma, 1898-1948* (1997). The most recent attempt is *The Emergence of American Zionism* by Mark A. Raider, a promising young historian at the State University of New York at Albany. In this well-organized study, Raider traces the transformation of American Zionism from a disjointed,

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grassroots phenomenon in the early 1900s into a central passion of much of American Jewry by the time Israel was established in 1948.

The book does have its limits. For starters, the title overreaches. Raider really only analyzes the emergence of the Labor-Zionist paradigm and the Labor-Zionist establishment in America. The book betrays its roots as a doctoral dissertation by getting bogged down in too-detailed accounts of organizational politics. Moreover, Raider should have taken a closer look at the American Jewish immigrant mentality that proved so receptive to Labor's ideals. A deeper analysis of American Jewish liberalism, and American ethnicity in general, would better explain American Jews' ambivalence about their own material success, as well as the community's continuing fascination with Israel.

Still, what sets Raider's story apart is his focus on the Zionist *idea* in America: A complex mix of Americanism and Jewish nationalism, of secularism and spirituality, of capitalist and socialist ideals, fashioned by homegrown intellectuals and tailored to the needs of an American Jewish community desperate for unity and pride. For all its contradictions, it was this uniquely American Zionism which galvanized American Jewry in a way that no other idea has done before or since—and which, because of

its intellectual underpinnings, has become increasingly irrelevant as the Jewish state has matured and prospered.

Over the first four decades of the twentieth century, the ideal of a Labor-Zionist Palestine came to dominate American Jewish conceptions of the Jewish state, even as the great majority of American Zionists belonged to organizations which were not formally Labor-Zionist, such as Hadassah and the Zionist Organization of America. American Labor Zionism differed from the European variety, rooting itself not only in the prophetic tradition and Russian socialism, but also in American labor unionism and progressivism. The assimilating Jewish masses found the Labor-Zionist emphasis on ethnicity over faith appealing. Ironically, then, the American Zionist ideal eased the Jews' transition into American life.

In the effort to recast Zionism in an American idiom, Labor Zionists in the 1920s and 1930s drew upon America's own pioneering past, comparing the *halutzim*—the Labor movement's pioneers in Palestine—to the Pilgrim settlers of New England, to the cowboys of the Wild West, and even to Horatio Alger. American Jews viewed Palestine as the new Jewish frontier. Steeped in American mythology, they romanticized the settling of the ancient Jewish homeland as a celebration

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of “independence, adventure, industry, physical strength, youthful optimism, surety of purpose and expansion.” Indeed, Labor Zionism “served as a lens through which American Jews viewed nascent Palestinian and American society as many thought both ought to be: Full of promise and opportunity, industrious and expansive, and, not least of all, capable of elevating the human condition.” By the time of the Holocaust, Raider writes, *halutzit*—the Zionist pioneering spirit—had become nothing less than “a hallowed American Jewish ideal.”

At the same time, Zionist institutions paradoxically became the vehicles for absorbing European Jewish immigrants into American society. In Zionist clubs, young immigrants practiced English, learned the finer points of democracy and mastered the uniquely American approach to volunteer organizations. Many of the building blocks of American Jewish identity, including the Hebrew schools, the United Palestine Appeal and Jewish summer camps, made Labor Zionism more American, while making American Judaism more Zionist.

American Zionism, however, was most distinctive in its ideas, not its institutions. Interwar Labor-Zionist thinkers such as Hayim Greenberg, Horace Kallen, Mordecai Kaplan and Maurice Samuel, whom Raider discusses at length, were “mavericks who

challenged American Jews to reevaluate their uniqueness as well as their relationship to Zionism and Eretz Israel.” For these thinkers, and for much of American Jewry after them, Zionism became the spiritual axis around which one’s Jewish identity ought to revolve. Yet at the same time, American Jews were to find fulfillment in America, not Palestine. These ideologues, whose ideas still shape American Jewish communal life today, rejected such classic European Zionist catch phrases as *sblilat bagalut* (“the negation of the diaspora”) and *kibutz galuyot* (“the ingathering of the exiles”). They did not view Zionism in America as a prelude to emigration; rather, they considered Zionism the fulfillment of the community’s commitments both to its American ideals and to its fellow Jews around the world. Zion was to be a “home for homeless Jews,” a grand solution to the Jewish Problem.

For these reasons, American Jewish thinkers had to address what Raider calls “the core problematic of American Judaism”: The question of what was to become of Jewish national identity in America, a country whose extreme individualist ethos made immigrant nationalities dissolve into ethnicities and faiths on contact, and which diluted the communal cohesion of the Old World. Their solution was to recast the Jews as an ethnic rather than national or religious group, in order that they might

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better survive in their new country. Following Louis Brandeis' dictum that "Zionism equals Americanism," they recognized that secular, cosmopolitan America "offered a singularly favorable environment for Jews to press their ethnic-American interests and claims, while championing individual freedom and national independence." American Judaism and Zionism could flourish together within a single Jewish identity.

In the process, American Judaism blurred distinctions between secular and religious Jews, and among the streams of Jewish religious life—distinctions which had been clear both in the traditional Jewish societies of Eastern Europe and among secular Western European Jews. American Zionism was spiritual and communal, but it did not mandate any particular form of Jewish worship or community. Mordecai Kaplan, the father of Reconstructionism, placed "spiritual Zionism" at the center of synagogue life, and set communal activism on a religious pedestal, insisting that "what the oil and wick are to the flame, organized Jewish life is to Jewish religion." The ideas of Kaplan and his colleagues cleared the way for the emergence of a new American Jewish ethic. The interpretation of Judaism as a principally religious, ethical or textual tradition gave way to an understanding of Judaism as a network of powerful communal institutions bearing the

standard of support for Jews around the world, and particularly in Palestine.

The result of the American Zionists' investment in such an inclusive, tolerant doctrine was that in moments of crisis, American Jews of all creeds could unite behind the Zionist cause. By the 1940s, American Zionist "leaders were expected to assume responsibility for the fate of the Jewish people"; they were the ones who later shouldered the blame for failing to convince the Roosevelt administration to stop the slaughter of European Jews. When the fate of the world's remaining Jews hung in the balance from 1945 to 1948, the American Jewish establishment mobilized to help establish an independent Jewish state in Palestine. "State building," writes Raider, "was no longer the purview of any single group but was elevated to the level of a quasi-messianic partnership between diaspora Jewry and Israeli Jews." Even large Jewish organizations that were not officially "Zionist" answered the Zionist call.

The state, of course, was built, and as Israel blossomed, the ideal of the Jewish pioneer-farmer slowly evaporated. American Zionism in the decades that followed gradually lost its ability to inspire, and all the more so once Israel ceased to be the poor cousin of American Jewry and grew into a regional economic and military power. *The Emergence of*

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*American Zionism* suggests that it could hardly have been otherwise: The movement's fundamental ideas—the reclaiming of the land, the establishment of a safe haven for oppressed Jewry, the socialist dream, the pioneering spirit—destined Zionism to lose its urgency once the land was reclaimed, the haven established, socialism discredited and pioneering rendered anachronistic in a technologically obsessed world.

Raider's story, then, sets the stage for the dilemma of American Zionism today. Israel is no longer an insecure foundling. Its economy is ranked among the world's top twenty-five (in terms of per capita GDP), its technological and human resources are rich, its strategic and diplomatic position stronger than at any point in its history, and it is now home to a majority of the world's Jewish children. At the same time, it is *American* Jewry that has become insecure. Assimilation and intermarriage have pulled the rug out from under the community, sowing uncertainty and even panic about its future.

Given these circumstances, it is natural that a redirection of American Zionism has quietly begun in recent years. And again, it is a uniquely American undertaking, embodying yet another paradox: Whereas Jews once used Zionism as a means of escaping from Jewish traditionalism, American Jews today are beginning to see Israel—a

young, predominantly secular state—as a road back to their ancient traditions. Among Orthodox Jews, a year of study after high school in an Israeli yeshiva has become *de rigueur* as a way to deepen one's attachment to Judaism. Among Conservative Jews, too, a recent study by the London-based Institute for Jewish Policy Research has shown a growing connection between attachment to Israel and religious involvement. Initiatives such as Birthright Israel, which seeks to bolster Jewish identity by subsidizing a trip to Israel for every Jewish youth in the world, have underscored a conclusion that some diaspora leaders have, apparently, reached: That just when the Jewish state has learned to become more self-sufficient, American Jews have themselves become needy. And what they need is Israel.

It is far too early to speak of a Zionist "renaissance," as some have prematurely begun to do. The movement depicted in *The Emergence of American Zionism* was fueled by intellectuals who struggled to craft a Zionism that could jibe with the unique predicament of American Jewry. A similar effort, no doubt, will be needed if American Zionism is to find new life. An effort of the mind is required—a reassessment of American Jewry's deepest communal, religious and spiritual needs, and of the role a vibrant Jewish state can play in meeting them. Such an effort

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would reveal to many what a few have already surmised: That Israel can again become the center of affection for American Jews, not as an object for their charitable impulses, but as an anchor for their own identity—as the very “spiritual center” which Ahad Ha’am predicted it would become a

century ago, a wellspring of meaning for a spiritually thirsty diaspora.

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