

Praise Canada

**Rekindling the Torch:
The Story of Canadian Zionism**

by David J. Azrieli

Key Porter Books, 2008,

272 pages.

Reviewed by Marla Braverman

As anyone who has backpacked abroad knows, one nationality takes pains to distinguish itself. Whether to express cultural pride or—more likely—to preempt the detested confusion with their southern neighbors, Canadians' conspicuous use of the maple leaf is a testament to their determination to stand apart. Understandably so: All too often, Canada is viewed by outsiders as merely a northward extension of the United States. So, too, with Canada's Jewish community; the heading "North American Jewry," for example, is usually just another way of saying "American Jewry." What, most Israelis (and Americans) ask, besides an eccentric pronunciation of the word "about," and an insistence

on the superiority of the Montreal (over Manhattan) bagel, makes Canadian Jews any different from the vast majority of coreligionists on their continent?

But this blurring of distinctions is unfair. In truth, the Canadian Jewish community differs in important respects from its American counterpart, as scholars of the newly minted field of Canadian Jewish studies are quick to point out. In the words of Ira Robinson, a professor of Judaic studies at Concordia University, the field reflects Canadian Jews' emergent "self-understanding that their community constituted something significant that was worth studying," along with the awareness that not everything of Jewish cultural significance is an import from somewhere else.

A key example is the community's broad commonality of purpose. To be sure, this results partly from the luck of the historical draw: As Gerald Tulchinsky explained in his 2001 essay "The Canadian Jewish Experience: A Distinct Personality Emerges," whereas American Jewry

was shaped largely by the waves of German Jews who arrived during the 1840s and 1850s, with their cultural baggage in tow—namely, the Enlightenment worldview, which would play a crucial part in the establishment of the Reform movement and theology—Canada simply never received a sizable number of German Jewish immigrants. Indeed, its immigration derived largely from the Spanish, Portuguese, and Lithuanian communities, which were more traditional in outlook and Orthodox in practice. Consequently, historian of Toronto Jewry Stephen Speisman could claim already in the first decades of the twentieth century that “The divisions between the traditional and liberal wings of [Toronto’s Holy Blossom] congregation appear to have been minor”—a statement that would be dismissed as absurd, if not outright impossible, if describing an American Jewish community at the time.

Furthermore, although much smaller, Canadian Jewry is actually growing demographically, and is less prone to intermarriage than are American Jews. (While the intermarriage rate of the latter is estimated to be around 50 percent, in 1980s Montreal it was between 6 and 13 percent.) Canada’s Jews are also, on the whole, more Jewishly educated, and more religiously homogenous. Perhaps ironically, this state of affairs

stems in some measure from the *absence* of the church-state separation to which American Jews point as the source of their material and spiritual prosperity: Since Canadian provincial governments can and do support religious schools, a Jewish education is on the whole much more affordable than in the United States. It should hardly be surprising, then, that Toronto and Montreal respectively boast the highest and second-highest Jewish day-school attendance in North America.

Finally, Canadians arguably display a more confident Zionism than do Jews beneath the 49th parallel north. Possibly, the reason is the lack of a competing nationalism, as in English-speaking Canada, at least, there has never been a public ethos that sought to prevail over other loyalties or identities. On the contrary, in its positive guises, Canada’s “cultural mosaic” renders Jewish citizens more comfortable expressing ethnic solidarity, and less susceptible to seeking out other traditions in the search for spirituality or connectedness. Moreover, Canadian Jews can look unabashedly to Israel as a source and anchor for their Jewish identity. Indeed, Canadian-day-school syllabi include Israeli children’s literature, with the goal of fostering a connection to the language and life of Jews in Israel. Canadian Jewish high

schools also offer Israel-oriented programs as part of the basic curriculum, and synagogues in Canada's largest cities—Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, and Vancouver—generally double as centers of effective communal mobilization on Israel's behalf.

In short, Canadian Zionists have a story all their own. Happily, Canadian-Israeli entrepreneur David Azrieli has stepped forward to tell it, in his absorbing *Rekindling the Torch: The Story of Canadian Zionism*. Clearly, for Azrieli, the subject is personal: Born in Poland in 1922, he arrived in Palestine at the age of twenty, after three years spent fleeing the Nazis. His architecture studies at Haifa's Technion were cut short in 1948, when he joined the fight for Israel's independence. Although Azrieli has lived in Canada since the 1950s, the various commercial complexes he has built in Israel—most notably Tel Aviv's Azrieli Towers—are but an example (if perhaps the most prominent one) of Canadian Jews' involvement in the prosperity of the Jewish state. Indeed, what emerges from Azrieli's book is a sense of just how surprisingly large, even disproportionate, the contribution of individual Canadian Zionists and the community as a whole has been to the State of Israel from its very beginnings.

Canadian Zionism, we learn in *Rekindling the Torch*, was officially launched with the establishment of the Federation of Zionist Societies of Canada in 1899. Noting that, at the turn of the century, "even American Zionists would envy Canadian Zionism for both its infrastructure and its ideology," Azrieli paints a picture of a movement that felt equally at home under the British imperial umbrella—especially once the British Mandate began—and in the fight for Jewish national independence. For instance, Lillian Freiman and her husband, Archibald—head of the Hadassah Organization of Canada and president of the Zionist Organization of Canada, respectively—were honored as exemplary Canadian citizens (in 1934, King George V conferred on Lillian the rank and decoration of the Order of the British Empire, Civil Division) even as they championed the right to a Jewish homeland. Furthermore, Canada's leading rabbis across the religious spectrum were avid Zionists, and its communal leaders never shied away from encouraging *aliya*.

Indeed, Azrieli shows, Canadian Zionists—Jews and non-Jews alike—played a key part in the philanthropy, advocacy, and diplomacy that proved critical to the establishment of a state. Lester Pearson, for example, who

served as prime minister of Canada from 1963 to 1968, was head of the Canadian UN delegation and chairman of the UN Political and Security Committee in the decade following World War II; as such, he was tasked with heading the subcommittee that examined the feasibility of the 1947 Partition Plan. Of his stance, he would later write, it seemed imperative that “after the annihilation of six million Jews in various countries in Europe, that arrangements should be made in at least one country in the world for the Jewish people to be definitely freed from the limitations and the fears imposed by minority status.” The Nobel Prize committee, in its citation for Pearson’s 1957 Peace Prize, states that “he laid the groundwork for the creation of the State of Israel.”

Azrieli also pays special attention to the Canadian Zionists who rose, in significant numbers, to the occasion in fighting for Israel’s independence (to that end, he provides the most comprehensive and authoritative list to date of Canadians who served in Mahal, Israel’s volunteer corps). As Azrieli notes, some 250 Canadians served in the 1948 war, many of them non-Jewish. Israel’s top air ace was a Canadian non-Jew, John McElroy, a veteran of the Royal Canadian Air Force. And of the 33 pilots killed on the Israeli side, 6 were Canadians.

Benjamin Dunkelman, scion of one of Toronto’s prominent Jewish business families and valiant soldier in Israel’s War of Independence, is one of those Zionist heroes Azrieli portrays at length. Dunkelman had fought gallantly with the Canadian forces during World War II, and then, in 1948, recruited many of his fellow Canadian veterans to defend the Yishuv. Dunkelman himself arrived in early April of that year, just before the declaration of the state, traveling under a forged passport. He fought in the siege of Jerusalem, and then commanded the Seventh Brigade, composed largely of American and Canadian volunteers. Perhaps Dunkelman’s most famous act in the war, narrated in his own autobiography, was his refusal to obey an immoral order to expel the Arab civilian population of Nazareth—a clear violation of a surrender document, in which the IDF pledged to do nothing to harm the city or its inhabitants. When his commanding officer appealed to Minister of Defense David Ben-Gurion to have Dunkelman sanctioned, Ben-Gurion vetoed the request. A bridge near the Lebanese border is known as “Ben’s Bridge” in honor of both Dunkelman’s bravery and his exemplary character.

Interestingly, one of the most important Canadian volunteers lost his

life before he ever saw action: George Beurling. Beurling was offered the then-astounding wage of \$2,000 a month to serve in the Egyptian air force. A devout Christian, Beurling rejected the Egyptian offer, deciding instead to serve, without pay, on the Israeli side.

Less obvious, yet no less critical, were the behind-the-scenes contributions of Canadian Zionists to Israel's fight for survival. Azrieli explains, for example, how the freighters purchased by Canadian Jews to assist in *Aliya Bet*—the smuggling, by ship, of European Jewish refugees into Palestine between 1920 and 1948, when the British imposed severe immigration quotas—became the core fleet of the fledgling Israeli navy, along with a converted passenger boat bought by Torontonians Samuel Zacks. He also nods at lesser-known players in Israel's battle for independence, such as Winnipegger David Harris. Harris was part of a group formed by prime-minister-to-be Ben-Gurion to acquire the arms Israel would need to fend off invading Arab armies. Using *Bens Delicatessen* in Montreal as his purchasing office, Harris negotiated deals with suppliers based on a code from the restaurant's menu. By sharing these and other stories, Azrieli reveals a community that went to great lengths to ensure the nascent state's survival—just as it would come to play an influential role

in shaping Israel's society and culture in the decades to come.

Between 1948 and the outbreak of war in 1967, the Canadian Jewish community consolidated the Zionist component of its identity. Not content merely to help safeguard the existence of the state, Canadian Zionists turned to new avenues of involvement and support, such as the creation of social, cultural, and, perhaps most influential, economic ties between the two countries.

The Bronfman family, whose patriarch Samuel built the Seagram liquor empire, is a case in point. For more than three decades, until his death in 1971, the elder Bronfman set the pace in Canadian fundraising for Israel. Since his son, Charles, picked up the torch, the family's gifts to Jewish charities and causes have continued to be among the largest in North America. (Most notable, of course, is the Birthright program, responsible for bringing 260,000 young Jews from around the world on a first visit to Israel.) But perhaps less known is how the Bronfman genius in business proved instrumental in helping to develop the Israeli economy: Azrieli notes the family's establishment of the Jewish state's iconic chain of supermarkets, Supersol, and of Task Force, a group of top Jewish financiers and industrialists who helped Israel gain

economic independence through the marketing of Israeli exports and the expansion of its overseas outlets.

Azrieli mentions other prominent Canadian entrepreneurs, such as Murray Koffler, the founder of Canada's Shoppers Drug Market chain, and his son, Leon, who moved to Israel in the 1970s. Both revolutionized mass-market retailing in Israel through the introduction of the nationwide Super-Pharm chain. George Cohon, founder of McDonald's Canada, persuaded Canadian banks that it was safe to hold Israeli bonds as part of their capital base. And of course, there is Azrieli himself, who, according to Canadian historian Gil Troy in the book's introduction, "coined the Hebrew word for malls" (*kanyon*) when he opened the first of many shopping complexes in 1985.

Finally, certain Canadian Zionists' talents and interests have led to contributions to Israeli society of a very different sort: Ayala Zacks, for instance, a patron of the arts in Israel and Toronto, donated half of her and her husband's (the aforementioned Samuel Zacks) collection of modern European masterpieces to Israeli museums, significantly enhancing the ancient country's modern art holdings. And media magnate Israel (Izzy) Asper combined his love for Israel with his business expertise to help found the Canada-Israel Com-

mittee, which garners political support for the Jewish state and increases communication between Israelis and Canadians.

Unfortunately, perhaps the biggest challenge facing Canadian Zionists today lies within their own borders. Anyone who has seen some of the more unpleasant images streaming out of Canada of late, most notably from Toronto's York and Montreal's Concordia universities, two of the twelve Canadian hosts of last year's Israeli Apartheid Week "festivities," cannot help but be struck by the dissonance between Prime Minister Stephen Harper's robustly pro-Israel stance—a significant reversal of the country's longstanding status as a "neutral broker" in the Middle East—and the radicalization of certain parts of Canadian society. Sadly, despite its cultural aversion to conflict, Canada has increasingly borne witness to the sight of Jewish students harassed on campus, and of anti-Israel divestiture resolutions bandied about on Canadian universities and in workers' unions to greater support.

The roots of this apparent anomaly, as Gil Troy explained in a recent article in *Tablet* magazine, lie in several elements unique to Canadian culture, beginning with its cultural-mosaic ideal. Unlike the American "melting

pot,” which encourages distinct traditions and identities to assimilate into a homogenous whole, Canada’s “salad bowl” facilitates ethnic bonding—for better or worse. On the one hand, without the pressure to merge into a common culture, ethnic groups can indeed engage in and express their own cultural heritage more freely. On the other hand, ethnic divisions inevitably become more pronounced. In a country that former Canadian Liberal Party and Opposition leader Michael Ignatieff described in his 2000 *The Rights Revolution* as outdone only by New Zealand in its recognition of the idea of group rights, the line between ethnic pride and incitement becomes harder (and more politically incorrect) to police. Unfortunately, for the radical minority of Canada’s 500,000 or so Muslims, this admirable and well-intentioned commitment to equality and group rights has frequently translated into cover for anti-Israel activism. Add to this the widespread assessment that Canadian

political culture is more European—that is to say, secular and liberal—in nature than America’s, and the result is a country whose recent, official turn toward Israel in friendship may yet be overshadowed by the shrill protests and ugly scenes its vocal anti-Zionist minority stages.

Yet as Azrieli’s book demonstrates, Canadian Zionists have proved throughout their history that they are a force to be reckoned with. We can only hope that, as with past challenges, so too today, Canada’s Jews will rise to the occasion, and defend the rights of Jewish Canadians to feel safe on campus, and to express their solidarity with Israel without fear. The Jewish state should not only wish them well, but, armed with the proof Azrieli’s book provides, see that a strong Canadian-Israeli connection is very much in its own best interests.

Marla Braverman is senior editor of AZURE.