

# ZIONISM

**P A S T   A N D   P R E S E N T**

**NATHAN ROTENSTREICH**

# Zionism

SUNY series in Jewish Philosophy  
Kenneth Seeskin, editor

# Zionism

*Past and Present*

Nathan Rotenstreich

Foreword by  
Ephrat Balberg-Rotenstreich

With an additional essay by  
Avi Bareli and  
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Afterword by  
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State University of New York Press

Published by  
State University of New York Press, Albany

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Printed in the United States of America

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For information, contact State University of New York Press, Albany, NY  
[www.sunypress.edu](http://www.sunypress.edu)

Production by Diane Ganeles  
Marketing by Michael Campochiaro

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Rotenstreich, Nathan, 1914–1993

Zionism : past and present / Nathan Rotenstreich.

p. cm. — (SUNY series in Jewish philosophy)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7914-7175-3 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Zionism. 2. Israel. I. Title.

DS149.R643 2007  
320.54095694—dc22

2006032532

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# Foreword

The present book was written by my father, Nathan Rotenstreich, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The manuscript was left in his literary estate, and the Rotenstreich Foundation, established for taking care of the vast literary estate he left behind, was engaged in the effort of bringing it to press. Most of this literary estate has been published in his lifetime, from the early 1930s and during the many years of his academic and public career.

This manuscript, titled by him *Zionism: Past and Present*, can be regarded as a kind of spiritual and intellectual legacy regarding a subject about which he wrote extensively. The publication of the book is an opportunity to thank all those who made it possible: Eli Eyal, chairman of the Rotenstreich Foundation, for his continuous dedication, support and friendship; Shlomo Avineri for writing the afterword, and together with Berel Lang for paving the way and supporting the publication of the book; Kenneth Seeskin for his patience and support as an editor; Avi Bareli and Yossef Gorny for writing the introductory essay; David Heyd and Dan Laor for their efforts at the Rotenstreich Foundation. And last but not least—the production team at SUNY Press—James Peltz, Diane Ganeles, and all those who took part in this endeavor and brought it to completion.

Publishing a book without the author to consult with and see to all the finest details is almost impossible. Without the help of all these people it could never have happened.

Ephrat Balberg-Rotenstreich

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# An “Inside Intellectual”: Remarks on the Public Thought of Nathan Rotenstreich

AVI BARELI AND YOSSEF GORNY

The essence of Nathan Rotenstreich’s career may be ad-  
duced from an incident that took place in his early adult-  
hood. In 1932, at the age of eighteen, he moved to Palestine.  
Rotenstreich was a member of the Socialist-Zionist youth move-  
ment Gordonia—a member of one of the first groups in the  
movement—and a faithful adherent of the *halutsic* (Zionist pio-  
neering) ideology that the movement encouraged. In the natu-  
ral course of events, he would have become a *haluts* (pioneer)  
along with the rest of the group. However, according to retellings  
by friends and family members, the leaders of the movement  
decided to treat him as an exception and have him enroll at the  
Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This, they thought, would  
allow him to make a more meaningful contribution to the nation.

Thus, Rotenstreich’s endeavors in scholarship and research  
were from their outset pregnant with social and national  
significance and set within a political context. Rotenstreich was  
committed to the Jewish settler society in Palestine and the Jew-  
ish people and was their self-styled emissary. Furthermore, there  
was a public that did consider him its emissary and designate him  
to serve the causes of the collective. For decades, he was a mem-  
ber of the leading party in the Zionist Labor Movement, Mapai,<sup>1</sup>

and enjoyed an easy proximity to its leaders, including David Ben-Gurion; he was also a key figure in a political group called Min ha-Yesod, a faction that seceded from Mapai in the early 1960s.<sup>2</sup> He maintained strong relations with Gordonia members in the kibbutz movement, in Mapai, and, later on, in Min ha-Yesod, and with their leader, Pinchas Lavon, a leading figure in Mapai who became the leader of Min ha-Yesod. Nevertheless, Rotenstreich was a strongly independent-minded intellectual who did not subordinate himself to anyone. He was *engage*’, devoted to the interests of the Jewish people at large, but did not submit his own judgment to any authority. His formative environment and national and social affiliations underlay his evolution into an “inside intellectual” who contemplated his society from the standpoint of one who was immersed in its life and who identified with it—in a critical spirit.

Nathan Rotenstreich was born on March 31, 1914, in Sambor, eastern Poland (today in Ukraine). His father, Dr. Ephraim Fischel Rotenstreich, was a Polish Zionist leader and an important public figure in his hometown. When independent Poland was founded in 1918, the elder Rotenstreich was elected to the Polish Senate and the Sejm as a representative of the General Zionist Party. The family moved to Lvov, where Nathan Rotenstreich finished high school. His teachers at the Hebrew University included Samuel (Shmuel) Hugo Bergman, Gershom Scholem, Julius Guttman, Leon (Haim Yehuda) Roth, and Joseph Klausner. In 1938, he completed his PhD dissertation on Marx’s Theory of Substance. He worked with the Jewish Agency from the time he moved to Palestine until 1949, and in 1950 he became a senior lecturer at the Hebrew University.

Rotenstreich was one of the leading figures in Israeli academia in the country’s formative years. His status was reflected in the official posts that he held: Dean of the Faculty of the Humanities at the Hebrew University (1958–1962) and rector of the University (1965–1969). After his retirement, he was vice-president of the Israel Academy of the Sciences and Humanities from 1986 until his death (October 11, 1993). However, Rotenstreich was also one of the leading exponents of academia and a personality of vast formal and informal influence

in the affairs of Israel’s universities. He was among the founders of the Israel Academy of the Sciences and Humanities (1963) and the enunciators of its basic principles; he was also the first chair of the Planning and Grants Committee (PGC) of the Council of Higher Education (1973–1979), a powerful institution that regulates the budgeting of Israeli universities and research institutes. Rotenstreich played an important official role in establishing the autonomy of research and higher-schooling institutes by shaping the *modus operandi* of the PGC. His political and organizational connections with the Zionist Labor Movement, the dominant force in Israel’s first decades, did not diminish his commitment to academic autonomy. Rotenstreich was one of the academic leaders who buttressed the autonomy of Israel’s universities and research institutions, assuring them a substantial degree of independence from the authorities. As he went about this, he also steered them toward identification with Israel’s goals and national and social values.

Rotenstreich was noted as a philosophical commentator of world repute. Among other things, he was a leading personality at the Institute International de Philosophie in Paris and the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, California. His many works (more than 80 books and 600 philosophical articles in important journals) include profound and original interpretations of the philosophies of Kant, Hegel, and Marx, as well as discussions of additional and diverse issues in philosophy. In conjunction with his teacher, Bergman, he translated into Hebrew Kant’s three *Critiques* and *Perpetual Peace*, and without a collaborator he translated Kant’s *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. By so doing, he made an important contribution to Israel’s society and language that the country’s academic philosophers rarely matched. This considerable effort reflected Rotenstreich’s sociocultural commitment, which was also manifested in his continual research into Jewish philosophy and the encounter of Jewish thought—secular and religious—with the crisis of modernity. By exploring philosophical questions about the status of Judaism in the modern era, Rotenstreich sought to tackle the spiritual agonies of his national collective, modern Jewry.

It was this commitment that prompted Rotenstreich to reveal his public thought in journals and newspapers. Rotenstreich was one of Israel's outstanding publicists in the early decades and an important ideologue in the circles of Mapai and the Zionist Movement at that time. He published his writings in periodicals affiliated with Mapai and the Zionist Labor Movement, such as *Davar*, *Molad*, *Ha-po'el ha-Tsa'ir*, and *Min ha-Yesod*; in the newspapers *Ha'aretz* and *Ma'ariv*; and in many other forums. Our discussion will focus mainly on several aspects of his copious public writing but it will try to probe the philosophical origins of this writing as well. Since Rotenstreich was a Socialist Zionist in terms of ideological worldview and political and organizational affiliations, his thinking was typified by a visible synthesis of national and social outlooks—a synthesis based on striving for voluntary shaping of collective life at all levels. Zionism and Socialism merged in his thinking; one should not construe these two elements in his thinking as distinct and unrelated. Both stem from the same source: the striving for collective self-determination, and therefore are intrinsically connected in Rotenstreich's view. Although we mention the Socialist aspect of his critique of the sociopolitical shaping of the State of Israel in its initial years and note the same aspect in Rotenstreich's general views, we focus on his national outlook and his critique of the coalescence of Israel–Diaspora relations, since these are the main concerns of this book. We hope our remarks will help the reader of the articles in this book. Rotenstreich gathered the articles at the very end of his life and one may consider them his public testament.

### The Voluntaristic Fundamental in Rotenstreich's Thinking

Nathan Rotenstreich's Zionist and Socialist worldview was pronouncedly voluntaristic. His thinking aspires to a life shaped by rational will rather than to succumb to what seems to be social and national realities. He was acutely aware of the yawning gap between human reality and people's aspirations; he also realized that any fulfillment of aspirations involves the negation

of what is unfulfilled. This awareness steered him toward pointed diagnosis of the historical reality; that is, toward Realism. However, he did not limit himself to Realistic diagnoses and the exposure of the dialectic nature of fulfillment. Instead, he repeatedly urged his readers to take a straightforward view of reality in order to fulfill the will of the individual and the collective in reality.

In this respect, Rotenstreich was plainly a left-wing thinker in the original sense of the term "Left." He demanded that the individual and the collective transcend the social and national reality and shape it in their spirit, instead of succumbing to it and accepting it as given. Rotenstreich's voluntaristic intent may be traced to two important sources: Kantian ethics, which stresses the centrality of will guided by the imperatives of reason; and the Socialist Zionist halutsic movement, which is noted for idealism infused with the ardent will of free-spirited people who pledge much of their lives to service of the Zionist "general will" in Israel. Gordonia, Rotenstreich's youth movement, was one of the most important branches of this movement, and his interpretation of Immanuel Kant's philosophy was one of the mainstays of his own research. Evidently, however, Rotenstreich was committed above all to the voluntaristic outlook, which emphasizes the centrality of rational will, and it was this commitment that underlay his continual recourse, throughout his adult life and in his philosophical and public writings, to Kantian ethics and the values and hopes of the Zionist Labor Movement.

It is the strong convergence of political views and philosophical leanings in Rotenstreich that make him an "inside intellectual." We use this term to denote Rotenstreich's oscillation between being an intellectual, that is, a contemplator who, as such, maintains a distance from the reality of his object of contemplation, and his moral commitment to the shaping of this reality. The moral commitment at issue flows from his own philosophical contemplation, among other things, but also leads him "inward" and urges him to be involved, to manifest his Jewish affiliation intensively, and to take part in activities of political and social organizations of the Zionist Left that aspire to shape national and social patterns.

This convergence of Kantianism, Zionism, and Socialism around the focal point of rational will, if one may express it in shorthand, was conspicuous in Rotenstreich's public writing. The focal point of this convergence is visible in a lengthy series of articles that Rotenstreich published about Zionist and social issues. A salient and illuminating example—one of many—occurs in his article "Socialism and the Problem of Responsibility," published in late 1952 in the journal *Molad*. Rotenstreich's discussion of the concept of "responsibility" in the article is an applied development of two central concepts in the Kantian ethics of reason, "duty" and "autonomy." Rotenstreich bases the application on his interpretative view of Kant's theory of morality as essentially a philosophy of emancipation.

Rotenstreich's arguments in the article indicate that Rotenstreich's voluntarism and negation of determinism, on the one hand, and his Socialist outlook on the other are linked by the concepts of Kantian ethics. From Rotenstreich's standpoint, the question of responsibility of the individual who makes a moral decision and does not slide passively into a state of action pertains directly to the historical enterprise of the humanistic Left. It directly affects the fate of the socioeconomic enterprise of the left, which may be defined—especially by Kantian Socialists such as Rotenstreich—as a quest for authentic social existence arising from negation of the supremacy of the economic consideration.

"Socialism finds itself in a situation where it sees no other way of attaining the desired level of production than to behave as though it were not Socialism, and to nurture in the individual the urges of possession and of economic and social progress," Rotenstreich states at the outset of his argument in the article. The socioeconomic arrangements that Socialism has ordained, however, restrain these urges. Thus, the individual tumbles into a difficult zone that lies between encouraging these urges and restraining them. He "sees himself functioning as a capitalist and is judged as a Socialist. The beginning of his behavior should be capitalistic and its denouement should be . . . Socialistic."

This untenable and severely pernicious confusion occurs because Socialism separates its means from its ends. By so doing,

Rotenstreich believes, Socialism does itself a disservice. Socialism should not reduce itself to the anonymous regulatory frameworks of the welfare and planning state in order to alleviate slightly the inherent injustice of rationalism or economic efficiency, while individuals' actual behaviors continue to be guided by the profit motive even under Socialist dominion and regulation. By behaving thus, Socialism merely concedes its own defeat, because its main object since the time it was devised is the praxis in individuals' lives.

The flaw, in Rotenstreich's opinion as expressed in the article, is rooted in Socialism's perception of Man: "[Socialism] did not elevate the idea of responsibility to the rank of a central idea . . . ." Here Rotenstreich, champion of the idea of responsibility, proposes a Kantian amendment to the accepted Socialist theory of the time. In his opinion, man's demand for rights in its Socialist version, and *a fortiori* in its Liberal version, will inevitably metamorphose into hedonism and, in turn, to a stance made up solely of a demand from society. Rotenstreich preached something altogether different: encouragement of recognition of the individual's responsibility to his/her locality, a focus on the commonality of the individual and his/her personal and social activity. Such a focus, he hoped, might lead to an authentic or noninstrumental relationship between the individual and his/her actions. No longer would the action be perceived as a means but as "an objective and overt quasi-extension of his psycho-physical personality." Thus, of course, Rotenstreich regretted that the kernels of authenticity that had evolved in the Zionist Labor Movement were now, in Israel's first years, "awash in the whirlpool of the all-sweeping economic consideration."

Socialism expresses in nationalization a macroscopic view of society: it entrusts ownership to society in the macroscopic sense of the term "society." According to Rotenstreich, however, "Society did not appear in its concrete forms. . . . Whenever a society is anonymous, it appears as an organization and not as a concrete unit of life." Such a society encourages a culture of entitlement and leaves no room for the relationship of responsibility that intimacy presumes. Such intimacy is possible only where there is "an identity of economy and society" based on

the idea of the kibbutz (the Zionist and Israeli commune), an idea regarding “a society in which economic activity is one of the manifestations of social action.” Such an identity does not exist in all of the organs of the Zionist Labor Movement. An identity of economy and society can exist only in the kibbutz movement. But without such identity in some of its organs, the whole Zionist Labor Movement cannot be true to itself. Thus, “The fate of the Labor Movement depends on reinvigorating the kibbutz movement.”

Rotenstreich’s discussion of the concept of responsibility carries an implicit demand: the political, social, and economic institutionalization that the Zionist Left will shape during a specific formation-and-formalization period must leave room for personal autonomy. The individuals in the society he envisioned will be integrally related to, and interwoven in, the social and economic systems. Thus, the systems will be truly “theirs.” The concept that inspired Rotenstreich’s thinking here is authenticity, and therefore, as we have seen, he linked the demand for personal autonomy, or personal responsibility for one’s life, with intimate social relationships that are difficult to apply to broad political systems. The difficulty that arises here recurs in Rotenstreich’s extensive public writings. His conclusions often rest on profound critical analyses but express an untenable moralizing attitude when they encounter political reality. Sometimes they disserve his cause; they may, for example, encourage disengagement from the arena of concrete politics—which, after all, cannot be an arena of authentic individual expression. This would leave the political arena to visionless politicians.

Rotenstreich did not desire such an outcome, of course. He considered his intent decidedly political and regarded its crux as political institutionalization by means of the kibbutz movement, through the agency of collective socioeconomic circles that would be small enough to maintain individuals’ responsibility for their society. He hoped that the kibbutz movement would continue to be a pioneering, society-serving elite, as it had been in the pre-independence period, and that it would now function as a paragon for society at large and would inspire society to emulate it.

Rotenstreich's voluntaristic if not Utopian inclination was strongly manifested in this article. In 1952, as mass immigration doubled Israel's population and forced the country to tackle issues such as how to feed its citizens, Rotenstreich urged his comrades in the movement, leaders of the new state, not to succumb to "the grim facts of economic reality." Reality has its own intrinsic force irrespective of the Socialist Zionists' willingness or unwillingness to succumb to it, he argued, whereas their existential logic required them not to succumb. In other words, society-building should not wait until the economic and global basis for a Socialist society could take shape. From his standpoint, the very act of waiting was tantamount to succumbing. Socialism must not postpone "the creation of a social cell of human significance at the present time," since in the absence of such a cell, "Socialism would create with its own hands a social organization that would render it void." Rotenstreich even claimed that rejecting the primacy of the economic consideration is essential for Israeli society specifically. Israeli society, he said, is struggling to establish the physical basis of its very existence, and the struggle may lead to a confusion of standards and the evolution of a unilateral "functionalistic consciousness." To forestall such a possibility, a renewal of the "consciousness of responsibility" and "the social cells that carry its imprint" is needed.<sup>3</sup>

Rotenstreich extended his fundamentally voluntaristic approach to his Zionist views. Active individuals, he said, are as responsible for the fate of their nation as for the shaping of their society. Zionism signifies the reappearance of the collective Jewish will in history, and the fulfillment of Zionism depends on the determination of individual members of the Zionist pioneering movement to pledge themselves to the cause of the Jewish people at large. Rotenstreich termed Zionism an autoemancipation movement, not only to follow Leon Pinsker's lead but also to stress its being a *voluntary* autoemancipation movement and Israel's nature as a sovereign political society composed of Jews, as opposed to the Emancipation in Europe and, in particular, in America, and the total latitude of American Jews, which are the consequences not of voluntary, autonomous acts by Jews but rather of circumstances independent of them.<sup>4</sup>