

## **My Great-Great-Grandfather was an Anti-Zionist and all I got was a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Quagmire!**

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Rabbi Henry Berkowitz (1857-1924) was the “Beloved Rabbi” of Mobile, Kansas City, Missouri and Philadelphia. He is best known for being the founder of the Jewish Chatauqua Society in 1893, and was one of four members of the first graduating class of Reform rabbis in the United States. Rabbi Henry Berkowitz was an activist, philanthropist, counselor, community leader, voracious learner, teacher, prolific writer and speaker.

Now, four generations later, I’m his 27-year-old great great granddaughter inhabiting the same city and many of the same roles in my own community of young feminist and queer Jews. When I walk down Broad Street in Philadelphia, I feel how my chosen paths are the same ones my famous ancestor walked. Some things have changed and others seem never to change. A year ago I marched in an interfaith peace walk that ended at Berkowitz’s Philadelphia synagogue, Rodeph Shalom. This year, as in Berkowitz’ time, the mayor is under investigation for corruption.

Rabbi Berkowitz started the Jewish Chatauqua Society for continuing Jewish self-education and later for education of others about the Jewish community. In 1998 I started a philanthropic non-profit called The Self-Education Foundation. For the last two years I was program director of The Shalom Center, a Jewish and interfaith peace organization.

But one part of our shared story is more complicated. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Rabbi Henry Berkowitz aggressively opposed Zionism. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century I’m an anti-occupation activist, working for a just peace in Israel/Palestine and Iraq. At the time that Berkowitz was an anti-Zionist activist, his was a mainstream opinion in the Reform community. These days the position I hold is controversial and sometimes painful.

Each year at Passover I join my family for a dinner heavy with mostly unstated conflicts. For me the telling, *Seder*, of Jewish liberation is one intertwined with seeking freedom and self-determination for all oppressed peoples, including Palestinians. I’ve been moved by Freedom Seders -- detailing the 10 Plagues of the Occupation, for example -- to understand Passover’s message as one reminding me that my people’s freedom rests with the freedom of the Palestinian people.

Like other Jewish holidays, Passover’s story is open to interpretation in a multitude of directions. I’ve heard some people say that Palestinians are the modern-day equivalent of the Egyptians of the Exodus story; Arafat is Pharaoh; and modern Jews are oppressed and enslaved by the violence of the Intifada. Though my family doesn’t draw these particular connections, my own interpretation of the meaning of Pesach gives me a sense of outsidership—a “wicked child-ness”—each year. This is why I was surprised to learn that our family lineage contains, as my aunt told me, “a poster child for the anti-Zionist cause.”

Why and how did Henry Berkowitz oppose the creation of a Jewish state? I found that his early anti-Zionist arguments hold deep lessons for modern Jews and our allies. The acts of wrestling with renewing Jewish identity, assimilation, and nationalism that Berkowitz and his peers wrote and spoke about at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century are struggles that continue to resonate today.

Many Tikkun readers are familiar with the history of early Jewish immigration to this country and the history of Zionism, but a brief overview helps us to understand the conditions that surrounded both Zionism and anti-Zionism.

Many Spanish and Portuguese Jews, called Sephardim, came to the US from 1497 to the 1600s fleeing the Inquisition and its fallout. German Jews largely immigrated in the early 1800s, seeking opportunity and leaving discrimination. The Berkowitz family left Germany in a wave of Jewish émigrés responding to targeted oppression following Germany’s failed 1848 revolution. Henry Berkowitz was

born in Pittsburgh on March 18, 1857.

Jewish population in America grew exponentially in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, from 1,600 Jews in America in 1800 (.06% of world Jewry) to 3.6 million (almost 23%) by Henry Berkowitz's death in 1924. Much of this surge in US Jewry resulted from the plight of Russian Jews in the Pale of Settlement and the intense repression and violence that followed the 1881 assassination of Czar Alexander II. That year, the new Czar's principal advisor decreed that Russia would force one third of its Jews to emigrate, one-third to accept baptism, and the remaining third to starve to death. In the spring of 1881 the Russian government unleashed a series of pogroms (officially sanctioned riots) against the Jews at the same time it enacted a new set of discriminatory laws. Two million Russian Jews fled to the US between 1881 and 1914.

Many Russian immigrants had been poor peasants in Jewish ghettos. The American press portrayed them with the disrespect that is always paid to new immigrant communities. The German-American Jews—by this time in positions of relative power and assimilation—feared that the new immigrants would bring anti-Semitic fury upon all American Jews. Perhaps time had dulled their memory: on their arrival on these shores, they had received similar treatment by the then-entrenched Sephardic community.

In the context of this heavy Russian-Jewish immigration and German-Jewish panic, the stirrings of Zionism were first heard in mainstream political venues. Socialist Zionism had been incubating in the Pale of Settlement. After fleeing Russia in 1881, some Russian Jews settled in Palestine. Then, in 1894, Theodore Herzl was sent to cover the Dreyfus Affair—the case of a French Army Captain who was falsely accused and convicted of treason, largely as a result of virulent anti-Semitism in the French Army and press. Herzl was able to reach powerful people with his book “Der Judenstat,” an argument that the only solution to anti-Semitism was a Jewish homeland.

The American Reform Jewish community loudly rejected the stirrings of early Zionism. Reform leaders sounded sharp warnings—some concerned with justice and democracy and some motivated by xenophobia and selfishness. These arguments are useful to re-examine now, some 60 years after the formation of the State of Israel.

Rabbi Berkowitz was one of the most visible voices of anti-Zionism in the early days of Zionist organizing. At the 1899 Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) convention in Cincinnati, he claimed that Zionism was a form of racism. He argued that racial identification was incongruent with the Jewish community's religious identity. That year he published the essay “Why I Oppose Zionism” in the CCAR Journal and toured the country speaking against Zionism. At the 1899 CCAR Conference, Berkowitz's colleague Samuel Sale also spoke, rejecting Zionism because of his opposition to nationalism. He said, “The besetting sin and evil of this age is nationalism run to seed...Zionists are prophets of evil” (Fishman). These harsh words were not the only scathing indictments of political Zionism within the Reform movement. In 1897, a widely circulated paper quoted Isaac M. Wise, founder of the American Reform movement, as saying that Zionists represented all Jews as “the phantastic (sic) dupes of a thoughtless utopia.” This phrase became popular at the time. (Wise, 1897, p. xii in Fishman)

In the early 1900s, German Jews used even stronger language to warn that Zionism would prove to be a tool for anti-Semites. An *American Israelite* editorial of 1901 argued: “The worst of Jew haters could not have invented a better weapon against the Jews than that which has been placed in their hands by Zionists.” And in that same weekly newspaper, a 1902 editorial expounded that Zionism had in its brief existence done more harm to Israel than Christian anti-Semitism. The editorial charged that “Zionism and anti-Semitism are twin enemies of the Jews and the former is more potentially dangerous” (in Fishman).

In 1919 Rabbi Henry Berkowitz and others published an important petition in the New York Times, signed by three hundred prominent US Jews and titled "Protest to 'Wilson against Zionist State: Representative Jews Ask Him to Present it to the Peace Conferences.'" This statement was delivered to the Peace Conference in Paris that same year. The 1919 statement made five points in opposition to the Zionist movement:

1. A Jewish homeland would provide anti-Semites with proof that Jews could not be fully patriotic in other countries.
2. The creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine would suggest political abandonment of Jews who remained in other oppressive countries.
3. Zionists underestimate others' allegiance to the land. Quoting Sir George Adam Smith, the 1919 Petition read :

It is not true that Palestine is the national home of the Jewish people and of no other people. It is not correct to call its non-Jewish inhabitants 'Arabs', or to say that they have left no image of their spirit and made no history except in the great Mosque...Nor can we evade the fact that Christian communities have been there as long as ever the Jews were...These are legitimate questions stirred up by the claims of Zionism, but the Zionists have not yet fully faced them.

4. Racial and religious segregation are incompatible with democracy. The statement reads:

The rights of other creeds and races to be respected under Jewish dominance is the assurance of Zionism. But the keynotes of democracy are neither condescension nor tolerance, but justice and equality. All this applies with special force to a country like Palestine. That land is filled with associations sacred to the followers of three great religions, and as a result of migrating movements of many centuries contains an extraordinary number of different ethnic groups, far out of proportion to the small extent of the country itself. Such a condition points clearly to a reorganization of Palestine on the broadest possible basis.

5. The diversity of the Jewish community does not yield or demand a nationalistic bond, but rather a holistic struggle for universal rights and privileges for all Jews and for all people. A historical movement to gain freedom for Jews across the world had been damaged by racial oppression of Poles from Eastern Prussia; the massacre of Armenians in Turkey; and anti-Semitic violence in Germany, Romania, Russia and all over Eastern Europe. The only way to stop these evils, the signers argued, was to re-engage a movement to fight for the full rights of citizenship for Jews in every land. And, they added, "If the basis of the reorganization of governments is henceforth to be democratic, it cannot be contemplated to exclude any group of people from the enjoyment of full rights."

What would my life be like in 2005 if these words, these hopes and fears, had been heard and held by the policy-makers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? One hundred years later, my family believes that the Holocaust changed everything, and that Henry Berkowitz (who died in 1924) would have felt differently after World War II. Indeed the Reform movement as a whole did completely change its position. My own Reform upbringing was one of heavily Zionist education. I hear my family and Reform community asking: "How can we argue, after the Shoah, that anti-Semitism will ever cease? How can Jews be free without a secure Homeland?"

I think that Rabbi Berkowitz and his co-religionists gave eloquent warnings of the damage that would be done to World Jewry by creation of a Jewish State in Palestine. I personally can't say that World Jewry is safe from anti-Semitism because of Israel. I doubt that many would make such a claim. In my generation the US mobilizes and funds occupation of people around the globe in the name of "democracy." Israelis and Palestinians are humiliated, wounded, and killed daily in the struggle over land that the US and Britain occupied and then offered to the Jewish people, with great benefit to the US's interests in the Middle East.

Jews around the world face increasing anti-Semitism fixated on Zionism. The fool kings of US policy are informed by visions of Messianism and Apocalypse dependent on Christian Zionist power. And the international peace movement is full of Jews who only identify with their people when they critique Israel. Jewish activism on issues of racial, economic and gender justice in the US is deeply challenged by the "political litmus test" of where our potential allies stand on Israel.

Henry Berkowitz and others signed the 1919 statement with a hope for and belief in democracy that is both powerful and painful to read in 2005. I think it speaks to the wishes of many in the Jewish community and others around the world. The saying "Another world is possible" is heard commonly in today's peace movement. Those 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century visions of the anti-Zionist movement help me to imagine what that world might look like. In the words of my great-great grandfather:

As to the future of Palestine, it is our fervent hope that what was once a 'promised land' for the Jews may become a 'land of promise' for all races and creeds, safeguarded by the League of Nations which, it is expected, will be one of the fruits of the Peace Conference to whose deliberations the world now looks forward so anxiously and so full of hope. We ask that Palestine be constituted as a free and independent state, to be governed under a democratic form of government recognizing no distinctions of creed or race or ethnic descent, and with adequate power to protect the country against oppression of any kind. (Berkowitz et. al 1919)

For my generation, a group that came of age as activists during the first and second intifadas, the struggle for a just peace can feel overwhelming and hopeless. Maybe next Pesach I'll open the door not just for Elijah, but also for Rabbi Henry Berkowitz and the ideals he preached from the Reform rabbinate. I imagine he might help us to remember the literal interpretation of our collective community coda "Next year in Jerusalem": Next year in a city of Peace!

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