

Gershom Scholem on Zionism (July 30, 1921)

Abstract

Zionism assumed various forms in Germany, with different groups and individuals emphasizing political, cultural, religious (the Mizrahi movement), or practical Zionism. Additionally, Germany hosted left-wing Zionist groups such as the non-Marxist, socialist Hapoel Hazair (“Young Worker”) and the Marxist Poalei Zion (“Workers of Zion”), both of which established branches there. Moreover, Germany also saw the emergence of a revisionist movement in the mid-1920s. In the following letter, Gershom Scholem shares his thoughts on various forms of Zionism with Robert Weltsch and Hans Kohn. Weltsch was editor-in-chief of *Jüdische Rundschau*; Hans Kohn was a historian and contributor to Martin Buber’s monthly journal, *Der Jude*.

Source

To Robert Weltsch and Hans Kohn

Munich, July 30, 1921

Dear Sirs,

[...]

Not only does my systematic notion of Zionism strictly disqualify as irrelevant, if not pernicious, the expression “*revolutionary Zionism*” you so often employ; in reality, it disqualifies the entire political sphere in which the revolution is rightly regarded as essential. Even if Zionism were a revolutionary undertaking, it would have to exercise double or triple caution in avoiding such terminology, which only gives license to empty minds to swagger and boast as they like and, with their prattle, to compromise and endanger the most vital affairs of our people. The impurity of this terminology has allowed a loquacious clique of *galut* literati to extol themselves as “young workers” and to overcome with a few clever phrases the distance between them and Palestine (a distance that stems not from ignorance but from reverence for what occurs there). Such impurity is inherently obscene. Added to this is the real reason driving it all—namely, the fatal “modern” conflation of religious and political categories that desecrates both, turning them into a game that someday is bound to turn violent.

[...]

I in fact pledge my allegiance to an utterly nonrevolutionary notion of Zionism—or one that can be labeled revolutionary only with deep and nearly indecent irony, since it refers to a stratum where there are no revolutions. I do not think that the task of Zionism has any essential relation to social problems. In other words, I am convinced that *if* the rebirth of the Jewish people succeeds, it can do so even in the worst capitalist state, just as it could flounder in a socialist one. Nor do I know a thing about the revolutions of the spirit that you demand. Instead of the upheavals you lay claim to, I know only the deep continuity of the Teaching—which has obviously faded from Zion, though Zionists haven’t noticed this.

[...]

With best regards, Gerhard Scholem

Source: Gershom Scholem, *A Life in Letters, 1914–1982*, edited and translated by Anthony David Skinner. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, pp. 119-21.

Source of original German text: Gershom Scholem, *Briefe I, 1914–1947*, edited by Itta Schedletzky. Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1994, pp. 215–17.

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