

Abba Hillel Silver and David Ben-Gurion

A Diaspora Leader Challenges the Revered Status of the "Founding Father"

A. Introduction: When a Political Leader Becomes a "Founding Father":

Examining in retrospect the changes in status of a political leader, once he becomes personally identified with the successful attainment of a groundbreaking collective endeavor, such as a project of national building, it is hard to conceive of a time when this leader was looked upon by both supporters and adversaries as just another player, without the extra shield of admiration and charisma that by now seems as an intrinsic part of his public personality. Such may be the case when examining the political activity of Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, attempting to imagine a period previous to his becoming the admired founding father of the newly established Jewish state.

In this paper I venture to "measure" the effects of this change in status by conducting a comparative study of the power struggles, before and after Israel's foundation, between Ben-Gurion and Abba Hillel Silver – focusing on the changes in Silver's perspective of Ben-Gurion's leadership after Israel's founding. During the immediate time before Israel's establishment, Silver was one of the most vocal and powerful leaders of the Jewish Diaspora and a potential contender to the top leadership position of the Zionist movement. Although not equal to Ben-Gurion, he was an important player in Zionist politics, with a formidable power-base behind him. However, Israel's establishment, headed by Ben-Gurion and to a large extent identified with his leadership, rendered Silver almost powerless in his struggle to challenge the latter's authority. He soon discovered that in the eyes of many Diaspora Jews, including his own American Zionist followers, Ben-Gurion personified a new sense of collective pride and Jewish belonging, and consequently it became almost illegitimate to challenge his leadership. Using this perspective of a Diaspora leader, who during the first decade after Israel's foundation was desperately looking for ways of coping with Ben-Gurion's rise to the new revered status of the "founding father", may help us understand the meaning of Ben-Gurion's new added charisma in terms of its impact on both the personal political rivalry between the two leaders, and the relations between the sovereign Jewish center of Israel and the Jewish Diaspora.

B. Looking back at a time when Ben-Gurion was just a formidable political rival:

During the years immediately preceding Israel's founding, Abba Hillel Silver, a Reform Rabbi in one of the largest and more affluent synagogues in the United States and an ardent Zionist advocate, was considered the most powerful leader within the American Jewish community and one who belongs to the top leadership of the Zionist movement.¹ His leadership was viewed by numerous admirers as epitomizing the yearning of the Jewish people after the Holocaust for a Jewish state. For many Jews, especially in the United States, he represented the Jewish collective demand to end the vicious cycle of Jewish marginalization which only a few years earlier had such tragic consequences in Nazi Europe.

Silver's rise to this top leadership position was a steady and systematic one, all through the 1930s and 1940s. Gradually, he became the preeminent American Jewish leader who made the Zionist demand for a Jewish national home into the defining purpose of American-Jewish public life². This is particularly true of the period following his groundbreaking speech, in August 1943, at the first meeting of the American Jewish Conference, an organization created to represent the then fragmented and split American Jewish community. With this speech Silver succeeded in garnering near-unanimous endorsement of the main points of the Biltmore Program (calling for an end to the British White Paper's restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine and for the establishment of a Jewish national home) by the hundreds of the emotionally stirred delegates to the Conference.³ From that point on he occupied a top leadership position within American Jewry, thanks in particular to his role as head of the American Zionist Emergency Council (AZEC), the organization that represented and coordinated all Zionist activity in the US. Silver reached a particularly high level of influence during the critical three-and-a-half year period (from mid-1945 to early 1949) in which he served as the AZEC's sole chairman (previously, he shared his leadership position with Stephen Wise⁴), and during that latter period he was virtually the undisputed leader of American Jewry in its campaign to enlist American and UN support for the establishment of a Jewish state.

During the late 1930s and the 1940s, Silver had several political encounters with Ben-Gurion, most of them being a mixture of collaborations and intensified disputes. Ben-Gurion was one of the first non-American Zionist leaders to understand the growing importance of the United States and its Jewish community to the Zionist cause. During these years he frequently traveled to the United States, stayed there for

long visits, and was very active in developing a network of political contacts.⁵ As part of these efforts he gradually became cognizant of Silver's growing political influence, collaborating with him on several occasions in an attempt to introduce a much more outspoken and activist Zionist agenda than the one previously held by the Zionist movement. The better known example of this collaboration was in initiating the Biltmore Program of May 1942, but even prior to this watershed event in Zionist politics, in both 1938 and in 1941, Silver, as the head of the main American Zionist philanthropic organization, the United Palestine Appeal (UPA), collaborated with Ben-Gurion in advancing UPA conferences' resolutions, calling for the Jewish community in Palestine to function as a sovereign Jewish entity.

Although sharing a similar activist Zionist agenda, the collaboration between the two leaders had its strains, the reason for the frequent frictions being both political and ideological. As I demonstrated elsewhere, in his thinking and activities Silver followed the pattern of an ethnic leader, looking for ways to legitimize the equal standing of his American Jewish constituent vis-à-vis the general majority society.⁶ The more he engaged in ethnic politics, attempting to use Zionism in galvanizing the ethnic power and self-consciousness of the American Jewish community, the less tolerant he became towards Ben-Gurion's consistent attempts to force his own Palestine-centered agenda on the American and Jewish-American political arenas, which Silver now considered as his own turf.

Ideologically, it was a struggle between the classical Zionist "negation of Exile" advocacy which was presented by Ben-Gurion and his colleagues as the uncontested answer to the long unresolved "Jewish question", versus the opposing perception of Silver and his Diaspora Zionist colleagues.⁷ The latter struggled to prove the feasibility and necessity of a Zionist doctrine that defines Jewish nationalism and statehood as merely a scaffold (albeit a supremely important one) for a long-term thriving Jewish Diaspora existence, and for the construction of cultural and religious bridges connecting between Diaspora Jews and their non-Jewish environments.⁸

Prior to Israel's founding, and regardless of their differences, the two leaders had no choice but to acknowledge each other's importance in Zionist politics, the most outstanding example being their tense cooperation during the 22nd Zionist Congress in Basel in late 1946.⁹ Their success in causing the resignation of Chaim Weizmann, the aging leader of the Zionist movement, from his long-held presidency of the World

Zionist Organization, could not conceal their continuous political rivalry. Ben-Gurion finally got the upper hand, successfully leading a pragmatic delicate line between Weizmann's appeasement and Silver's militancy. And yet, he could not ignore Silver's enormous popularity and strength among American Jews. While he retained the top Zionist leadership position, Silver was appointed as the head of the American section of the Jewish Agency - a new post especially formed for him, and one which consolidated his high leadership status not only in the United States, but also within the world Zionist hierarchy.

During the several months preceding the UN Partition Resolution of November 29, 1947, Silver's strength in Zionist politics grew even further. He was increasingly viewed by numerous admirers (especially among American Jews) as the foremost representative of the Jewish collective before the nations of the world. During this intensive period he spearheaded the Zionist campaign in the UN, and was regarded both in the US and internationally as embodying – via his public persona and his oratory – the Jewish collective's unwavering demand for a sovereign national home. For a short time it was not unreasonable– at least not in the eyes of Silver's numerous admirers - to see Silver as Weizmann's heir, and as the one leader embodying the Jewish aspirations for the establishment of an independent Jewish home.

This popular perception had direct bearing on the nature and intensity of the political rivalry between Silver and Ben-Gurion. Thus, at the beginning of the Zionist UN campaign, on May 8th 1947, there was a sort of behind the scenes race between the two leaders, attempting to determine who among them would deliver the first speech on behalf of the Jewish agency in its role as the internationally recognized representative of the Jewish people before the UN. Holding the more senior position within the Jewish Agency's hierarchy, Ben-Gurion was the one intended to deliver this historic speech, scheduled at 11 AM of May 8th. However, after it turned out that he would not be able to make it in time (his plane was scheduled to land only in the afternoon), a decision had to be made by the Zionist leaders who were present in New York whether to ask for a postponement of the UN speech or to nominate Silver as the alternate speaker. After a short debate, it was unanimously decided to nominate Silver to deliver the historic speech. The speech itself got across the board praises, even from Joseph Proskauer of the non-Zionist American Jewish Committee, who was one

of Silver's more outspoken critics. For a moment it seemed as if the whole American Jewish community, even its non-Zionist segments, accepts Silver's leadership and authority. Not surprisingly, Ben-Gurion, upon returning to Palestine, found faults in Silver's speech, and after a public exchange of angry letters he scolded Silver for defying the movement's authority. Silver responded in the same manner, accusing Ben-Gurion for disobeying the resolutions of the 22nd Zionist Congress.¹⁰

This tension between Silver and Ben-Gurion erupted full-force almost immediately after the successful completion of the UN Campaign. The political and public campaign that culminated with the acceptance of the Nov. 29th UN Partition Resolution was considered by Silver's numerous admirers as his greatest personal achievement. Silver's popularity was higher than ever, and there were many who expected him to immigrate to Palestine and to take over the leadership of the whole Zionist movement. These feelings were expressed in several mass celebrations of the Nov. 29th Resolution, the first one taking place already on Dec. 2nd (a rally organized by the American Zionist Organization in New York with twenty thousand participants) and the last one occurring a month later, on Dec. 29th, in the New York Astor Hotel. This last event was organized as a farewell party to Silver and his wife, before their departure to Palestine, to participate in the meetings of the Zionist executive committee. It was viewed by many, including a representative of the oppositional "General Zionist" party, Israel Rokach, as a first step taken by Silver, before settling in Palestine and openly challenging Ben-Gurion's leadership.

It is beyond the scope of this article to fully discuss the complex set of reasons behind Silver's decision not to settle in Palestine. Enough is to say that upon his arrival to the pre-state Jewish community of Palestine, in the midst of a critically tense military situation, Silver was immediately and harshly exposed to the dramatic difference between his own Jewish Diaspora ethnic agenda and Ben-Gurion's Palestine-centered survivalist one – a difference between a liberal based ideology which was centered on advancing the possibility of Jewish long-term vitality within its non-Jewish democratic surroundings, and the self-concentrated agenda of the soon to be struggling Jewish state, which had a pessimistic assessment of the chances of Jewish existence outside of Israel, and which saw Diaspora leadership as merely a tool in the struggle for Israel's survival.

Being a Diaspora Zionist leader, Silver could not easily give up his own Zionist doctrine, one that he pursued and developed throughout his adult life and to

concede to a doctrine which portrayed his own ethnic leadership, and in fact the whole American Jewish existence, as unsustainable for the long run. Yet, attempting to challenge this doctrine he had to cope with a completely new political reality. He soon found out that almost immediately after Israel's foundation, he was relegated to the margins of Zionist politics; the more important reasons for this development being his status vis-à-vis Ben-Gurion, who as the leader of the pre-state Jewish community, was now elevated to the revered status of the "founding father" of the recently established state.

C. After Israel's Foundation: Ben-Gurion's Elevated Status as Seen from Silver's Perspective

One main characteristic of the Silver-Ben-Gurion post-1948 relationship was the growing internal tension between Silver's ideological commitment to affirm Israel's centrality to American Jewish identity, and a countervailing obligation to impose restrictions and conditions upon the centrality of Ben-Gurion's leadership so it will not prevent the developing of a self-contained Jewish Diaspora existence. This tension was destined to increase in the context of the growing identification of Ben-Gurion with Israel's survival, and the need to unconditionally mobilize on behalf of Israel during its existential struggle in the decade following its establishment.

For the first five years after Israel's foundation, Silver repeatedly attempted to deny this inner tension, and to prove that one can confront Ben-Gurion and the Israeli leadership without undermining his own Zionist loyalties.¹¹ Silver expressed this attitude in a speech that may be titled the "Two Centers Speech", and which was given repeatedly in various versions between 1948 and 1952.¹² The main claim in his speech was that the most creative and flourishing periods during the 2,700 years of Jewish history were those in which a vibrant Jewish Diaspora center existed alongside the Jewish center of Eretz-Israel. He criticized the anti-Diaspora patronizing tone he found in Ben-Gurion's definition of Zionism, insisting that a new brand of Zionism – one that is not limited to *Alliya* (immigration to Israel) must be pursued after Israel's foundation. He warned against Ben-Gurion's secular Israeli-Zionist model – describing it as a serious danger to post-1948 Jewish existence. He explained that only a continuous dialogue between the leadership of the Jewish center of Israel and of the Diaspora may ensure the necessary integration of religion and Jewish nationality –

integration that in his view was the key to the long-term existence of Judaism both in Israel and in the Diaspora.¹³

Silver did not limit himself to sermons and speeches, but pursued his new two-center advocacy also in the Zionist and the Israeli political arenas, attempting to force the Israeli leaders to acknowledge American Zionism as an equal partner with its own independent leadership. His first attempt occurred already in August 1948 (barely four months after Israel's foundation), at the Executive Committee of the Jewish Agency, which was convening at that time in Jerusalem. He and his loyal colleague, Emanuel Newman, demanded a reorganization of the Jewish Agency, calling office holders in the Israeli government to resign from their posts in the Jewish Agency, and presenting it as a way to ensure the independent power of the world Zionist movement. Silver's second attempt to implement his two-center advocacy occurred in 1951 during the 23rd World Jewish Congress, when he and his American Zionist colleagues demanded of the Government of Israel to grant a special status to a Diaspora-based Zionist movement, both in the Diaspora and in Israel.¹⁴

In both instances Silver and his colleagues argued that the reorganization steps must be accompanied by a radical change of the Zionist discourse. They maintained that the Zionist movement must adapt itself to a new post-1948 reality, in which most of Diaspora Jewry will keep their present citizenship, and at the same time will seek a strong emotional and ethical commitment to Israel as a democratic and enlightened Jewish center.

In both instances Silver and his colleagues won a victory in the votes, but found, almost immediately, that their victory only served to emphasize their powerlessness vis-à-vis the Israeli leadership, and that soon after, it turned into a frustrating defeat. In January 1949, only a few months after most of the Israeli leaders, who were nominated to serve in the Israeli government (including Ben-Gurion) resigned from their offices in the Jewish Agency, Silver suffered his most serious defeat ever. Losing his control on the vast financial resources of the United Jewish Appeal (UJA) to a new alliance between Ben-Gurion and the non-Zionist Henry Morgenthau Jr. (the former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury in the Roosevelt administration), he and the American Zionist movement also lost their chances for independence, and hence he had no choice but to resign from all his posts in the Jewish Agency and in the Zionist movement. Similarly, in August 1951, after the special status resolution was adopted, against Ben-Gurion's will, by the 23rd Zionist

Congress, it became clear that it was entirely up to Ben-Gurion and the Israeli government how to word the status law. It was also clear that Ben-Gurion had no intention of giving up his dominance vis-à-vis Silver or any other Jewish Diaspora leader. After a year of discussions within the Israeli government and Israeli parliament, the "special status" resolution was worded in such a way that it limited the role of the Jewish Agency and the Diaspora-based Zionist movement to being only a so-called tool of the Israeli government in the absorption of new immigrants to Israel. Rather than giving special status and independence to the Diaspora Zionists, the new law in fact made sure that they had no authority of their own, not even among Diaspora Jewry.

This refusal to grant any legitimacy to an independent and self-conscious Diaspora movement was most visible on the personal level. Despite repeated direct and in-direct requests, Ben-Gurion refused to meet Silver, and when he finally invited him for tea (soon after the 23rd Zionist Congress), he refused to speak politics, and limited himself to a conversation about the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, thus demonstrating his refusal to acknowledge Silver as a Diaspora leader or even as a political adversary. At the same time, Ben-Gurion was ready to grant his acknowledgment to Jacob Blaustein, (head of the non-Zionist American Jewish Committee). In a way similar to the UJA crisis of January 1949, Silver found himself helpless against a strong alliance between Ben-Gurion and a non-Zionist leader. At least from his perspective, this alliance was based on the fact that Blaustein, like Morgenthau, did not see it necessary to interfere in internal Zionist politics, and did not see himself as an ethnic leader, whose responsibility is to invigorate the cultural or national Diaspora self-awareness of American Jewry.¹⁵

Silver ended this period of controversy defeated and frustrated. He had to contend with a growing discrepancy between his popularity and high general American standing (he had strong political ties within the Republican Party, and after Eisenhower and his new Republican administration came into power, he was the first Jewish cleric ever to officiate at the inauguration of the new president), and the continuous cold shoulder he and the American Zionist movement got from the Israeli leadership, the final blow being Ben-Gurion's refusal to use Silver's political connections within the new Eisenhower administration. In an eye-opening correspondence, worried partisans warned Ben-Gurion of Silver's intent to use his strong ties within the administration in order to gain new Diaspora leadership status,

similar to that of the Catholic Cardinal of New York, Francis J. Spellman. Ben-Gurion responded confidently that just as Spellman's authority is totally dependent on the Pope's consent, so is Silver's American Jewish leadership in its need to base its legitimacy on Ben-Gurion's authority.¹⁶ Silver painfully realized that Ben-Gurion was correct in his observation. By the end of this five-year period it was clear to him that his goal of using the identification with Israel as an essential cornerstone in the building of a viable Jewish Diaspora leadership cannot be achieved by openly challenging the dominance and authority of Ben-Gurion. Silver finally understood that in order to find a way that embraces Israel and at the same time affirms his own Jewish Diaspora agenda, he must stop seeing Ben-Gurion as a political opponent, and instead he must submit to his authority and acknowledge his elevated status as the founding father of Israel.

D. After Five Years – Silver Acknowledges Ben-Gurion's Leadership:

In contrast to Silver's early confrontations with Ben-Gurion, after 1952 he pursued an almost submissive posture, repeatedly stressing his loyalty to Israel and to Ben-Gurion's leadership, and avoiding any appearance of involvement in Israel's internal politics. This was a gradual change, and it reached its first peak in 1955, when Silver accepted the position as the head of the Israeli Bonds – the same non-ideological and non-confrontational position which was previously held by Morgenthau. In 1948-1949 Silver was ousted from the UIA (United Israel Appeal) and the UJA, because of his insistence on using them to challenge Ben-Gurion, and to pursue his Diaspora viewpoint despite and against Ben-Gurion's will. Now, in 1955, he accepted a position which was devoid of any Diaspora advocacy, and which was solely dedicated to serve the economic interests of Israel, no matter what its internal or international policies were.

This change of attitude reached its second peak in 1956-57, during the Sinai War and the political international turmoil hence after. In his private correspondence Silver expressed great reservations regarding Israel's aggressive military retaliation policy,¹⁷ however, publicly he gave his full support to this policy and to Ben-Gurion personally. When soon after the Sinai War, Israel struggled in vain against an American administration's demand for full withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip; he took upon himself to serve as Ben-Gurion's most loyal supporter

and emissary.¹⁸ In effect, he accepted a passive role of blind support and admiration of Israel, with no presumption to interfere in its policies.

Soon, this changed attitude had its "rewards". Contrary to Ben-Gurion's earlier antagonistic attitude toward him, now that he posed no ideological or political challenge, Ben-Gurion was ready to embrace him and to acknowledge his past contributions to the Zionist endeavor. This could first be seen in March-April 1956 when Silver visited Israel and was received by the Israeli leadership with open arms. Even before his arrival, the Israeli newspapers were tipped about a historic meeting that is due to take place between Ben-Gurion and Silver. The meeting took place in the Prime-Minister's office in Tel-Aviv, and before it ended, Ben-Gurion invited Silver to his daughter's wedding. Two days later, the Prime-Minister came in person to give the keynote speech in the opening celebration of Kfar Silver – an agricultural educational farm in southern Israel which was built in Silver's honor. In sharp contrast to his degrading attitude toward Silver in previous years, now, in 1956, he described Silver as the greatest Diaspora Zionist leader since the American Zionist revered veteran, Henrietta Szold. With this new tone, the rest of the Israeli leadership embraced Silver, and contrary to an almost total boycott by Israeli officials during Silver's previous visit in 1951, he was now invited to personal meetings with the President, Yitzhak Ben Zvi, with the Chairman of the Israeli Parliament, Yoseph Shprinzak, with the Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett, and to a special reception in his honor by the Finance Minister, Levi Eshkol. On his part, Silver announced in a press conference that he is not interested in any position in Zionist politics, and he clarified that in his meeting with the Prime Minister there was no discussion of political issues related to the Zionist movement.¹⁹

Perhaps the best illustrative example of Silver's new attitude toward Ben-Gurion's leadership could be found in a sermon of March 20, 1960, in which he reported to his congregation on his recent visit to Israel.²⁰ Silver portrayed very warm relations with the Prime Minister. He described a private conference with Ben-Gurion, proudly reporting about the Prime Minister asking his advice regarding a trip to the United States and a meeting with the American President, which were scheduled to take place a few days later. In his reporting on this conversation, Silver was very careful not to present himself as someone who presumes to advise Ben-Gurion on specific policy issues. The only advice he gave Ben-Gurion was to convey to the American President the marvelous achievements of Israel in the realms of

society and culture. On his part, Silver talked in admiration and veneration about Ben-Gurion's leadership – an admiration of the sort that until now he kept only for historical figures like Washington or Lincoln. The next day he was invited by Ben-Gurion to attend a discussion group on the Bible which the Prime Minister had held regularly in his home. Silver was full of admiration for a leader who finds time (four hours in whole) to summon a group of the elite Israeli leadership to discuss the Bible, before a crucial political trip to the United States. He presented Ben-Gurion as a legendary king-philosopher – an ideal leader of a utopian country, who combines in his conduct the heroism of King David with the wisdom of King Solomon. Silver ended his speech with a description of a conversation he had upon his arrival back to the United States with a Jewish immigration officer, who talked in admiration about Ben-Gurion as if he was a historic heroic figure. It seems that Silver, who was known for his oratorical eloquence, purposely chose this ending in order to cause his listeners to identify with the Jewish immigration officer's point of view. In sharp contrast to their past political frictions, now he chose to elevate Ben-Gurion to a realm which is above the day-to-day reality - one which is almost irrelevant to the inner Zionist and American-Jewish political controversies.

On the face of it, this dramatic, almost unbelievable, change in Silver's conduct toward Ben-Gurion is a telling example of the manner by which Silver finally conceded to the post-1948 Zionist political reality; his understanding that as a Jewish Diaspora leader in the post-1948 era he must accept the authority and leadership of Ben-Gurion, now being not a mere political leader, but rather a symbol of the Zionist revolution and a focus of collective Jewish Diaspora identification. The question still remains as to the means available to a Jewish Diaspora leader, like Silver, seeking to enhance a vital and flourishing Jewish existence which is committed to Israel and its policies, and yet, at the same time, has its own independent Jewish Diaspora agenda. The question is whether by accepting the incontestability of Ben-Gurion's charismatic leadership, he was not merely attempting to reinterpret Ben-Gurion's new revered status in a way that legitimizes his own Diaspora leadership.

E. "The best way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend" (Abraham Lincoln)

During the last decade of his life, Silver repeatedly used the above quotation, particularly doing so in two main contexts: in regard to America's Cold War policy and its relations with Russia, and in regard to the relations of American Jewry with

Israel and his own relations with Ben-Gurion.²¹ In both contexts, his use of this quote signified a new, much less confrontational tactic, and in both cases the moderate tone did not signify any fundamental change in his ardent religious-democratic and universalistic belief.²² On the contrary, in Silver's eyes the moderate tone was an expression of his unshakable semi-religious belief in the ultimate victory of the democratic and pluralistic way of life of the United States and of its Jewish Diaspora. This was exemplified most clearly in Silver's opposition to the Cold War. He presented the American democratic system as superior to any other political system, and was convinced that in periods of peace and economic development this inherent superiority would become most apparent. It was therefore the West's vital interest to prevent war and to stop the anti-communist hysteria, and instead to encourage economic growth and cultural development even within the Soviet Union. He believed that ultimately these developments will destroy Communism and all other dictatorships from within.²³

Similarly to his anti-Cold War advocacy, Silver's un-confrontational attitude toward Ben-Gurion and toward his version of Israel-centered Zionism did not signify any ideological retreat on his part. Quite the contrary, he described his brand of Diaspora Zionism as spiritually superior to the Israel-centered Zionist doctrine - one which he described as a basic survivalist version of Zionism. He likened the reconstruction of Jewish sovereignty to a struggle to secure the flow of oxygen needed for Jewish life. As long as this free flow of oxygen was interrupted or threatened, the Jewish people could not help but to devote all their energies to the existential need of breathing. However, while it was Israel's role to secure the free flow of oxygen, it was Diaspora Jewry's role to demonstrate that the oxygen itself, despite its critical existential function, was only a means for survival and it does not represent the destiny and mission of Jewish existence. In accordance with this metaphor, Diaspora Jewry had to accept its secondary role vis-à-vis Israel and to follow its leadership almost blindly in the crucial but most basic area of Jewish struggle for survival. Diaspora Jewry's main role was in leading a more spiritual endeavor, focusing on the content and mission of Jewish existence.

Following his own advice regarding these two assigned roles of Israel and of Diaspora Jewry, Silver avoided any direct confrontation with Ben-Gurion, accepting the incontestability of his leadership in the Jewish struggle for survival. His own leadership role, as he saw it, was to turn Israel's accomplishments into a basis of a

more advanced spiritual Jewish endeavor. One intriguing example of this mode of thinking was his speech in the opening session of the ZOA (Zionist Organization of America) Conference, which took place in New York on September 14, 1957, celebrating a 60th anniversary since the first Zionist Congress in Basel.²⁴ The speech was quoted in the Israeli oppositional newspaper, "Habboker", and was described there as a renewed challenge by Silver to Ben-Gurion's narrow definition of Zionism.²⁵ A comparison between the original speech and the text in "Habboker" indicates that the Israeli newspaper quoted the speech only in part and misunderstood its meaning. Silver did criticize those who limit Zionism to a personal commitment to *Alliya*, but insisted that this internal Zionist debate would have no effect on the unconditional American Jewish support for Israel's well being and existential struggle. The duty of American Zionists, according to Silver, was twofold: on the one hand unconditional support for Israel's struggle for survival – seeing it as the main focus of American Jewish identification; on the other hand, teaching the "true" religious and social universalistic interpretation of Israel's existence.

Silver devoted the major part of his speech to the above second goal, and already in the opening paragraphs (which were not quoted in "Habboker") focused on the universalistic context and optimistic meaning of Israel's founding. He described the 60 years since the first Zionist congress as a period that witnessed the exciting modern revolutions of nationalism and enlightenment, but also witnessed the agonizing catastrophic crises of human suffering which came in their footsteps. The leadership role of American Zionists was to present Israel's foundation as an optimistic counterweight to these crises and suffering. According to this American Zionist universalistic interpretation, Israel's foundation showed that although suffering the most from the social and political changes in modern European society, the Jewish people were successful in bringing an impressive national and religious-cultural awakening. Israel's struggle for survival thus served as a living example of the human ability to overcome the most formidable hardships and failures in a way that leads to the ultimate victory of the universalistic values of enlightenment and democracy.

This universalistic and optimistic interpretation of Israel's struggle for survival became even more self-evident in two other speeches, which were given by Silver in honor of Israel's tenth anniversary. Silver gave the first speech in his synagogue, the Temple, in Cleveland, soon after he returned from another visit to Israel.²⁶ He chose to describe this visit as a religious pilgrimage, and in so doing he gave Israel's

continued struggle for survival a symbolic revered interpretation. However, by doing so, he also distanced himself from the day-to-day Israeli reality, and in a way went back in time to the pre-Zionist period, when the sacredness and spiritual significance of the land of Israel and its Jewish inhabitants, and not any real involvement in its everyday life, served as the focus of identification for Jewish Diaspora. Differently from the involvement and criticism of his early post-1948 attitude towards Israel and its politics, he now limited himself to an admiring description of Israel's political leadership and of its spiritual role. This was most evident in his description of the spiritual universalistic atmosphere which he found at the dedication ceremony of the Hebrew University's new campus in western Jerusalem. The light that spread from the thousand candles held by the participants in the dedication ceremony symbolized in Silver's eyes the victory of enlightenment over the forces of darkness. Ben-Gurion quoted the famous biblical phrase: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord (Zech. 4:6), and Silver interpreted and explained that despite of Israel's need to rely on its military strength in its fight for survival, the real power and destiny of the Jewish people lies in its spiritual aspirations and achievements.

Two months later, in a second event celebrating Israel's tenth anniversary,²⁷ Silver elevated Israel and its leadership to an even higher pedestal. He suggested that the foundation of Israel was not a local event with limited importance, but rather an event equal in its significance to the few great revolutions that had a fundamental impact on human history. Among these ground-breaking historical revolutions were the great scientific discoveries of the time (the discovery of nuclear power and the voyage to space), the revolutions that heralded modernity and enlightenment (the Renaissance, the American Revolution and the French Revolution) and the central watershed events in Jewish history (the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the Torah, the emergence of the prophetic movement, the return to Zion and the victory of the Maccabees).

However, this context of great revolutions served not only to elevate Israel's foundation and to emphasize its importance, but also to present the "Zionist redemption" (as Silver named the foundation of Israel) as part of a long process of great revolutions, whose main importance is not limited to one specific location or to one concrete people, but to its ability to open the way to new and even more daring revolutions. Silver explained that the trauma of the Holocaust makes this universalistic and humanistic role of Israel especially outstanding. The founding of

Israel saved the Jewish people from the deep despair and disbelief in humanity, which was brought on by the Holocaust. It boosted a sense of national pride, which was not focused on Israel's physical might but on its universalistic heritage and mission.

Silver chose to finish his lecture by quoting a previous speech that he himself delivered about twenty years earlier in the Reform 1937 Columbus CCAR (Central Conference of American Rabbis) convention. This Reform conference is famous for adopting an alternative platform to the anti-Zionist Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, and Silver quoted from his speech the part presenting the Jewish national commitment as only one aspect of the core Jewish religious commitment to the principles of enlightenment and progress. In 1937 he directed this universalistic emphasis against his anti-Zionist Reform colleagues, who saw an unbridgeable gap between the universalistic message of the Jewish religion and Jewish nationalism. Now, in 1958, he used this same speech in order to present an alternative brand of Diaspora religious-national solidarity - one that sees Israel's founding not as a goal in itself, but as an intrinsic part of Judaism's universalistic religious commitment.²⁸

Although no longer confrontational, this approach was very different from the Israeli one. The difference was clearly demonstrated in Silver's response to Ben-Gurion's request in relation to the Israeli "Who is a Jew" political turmoil. The crisis broke out between the Israeli ruling labor party and its religious Orthodox coalition partners in June 1958, after the Israeli government approved a previous ordinance of the interior minister, allowing every citizen to register as a Jew based on a personal declaration, even in cases contradicting Halachic Jewish law. In an attempt to resolve this crisis, Ben-Gurion wrote to 50 Jewish spiritual leaders from Israel and the Diaspora, asking their opinions on this issue.²⁹

Although he was among the 50 leaders approached by Ben-Gurion, Silver chose not to answer him directly. He devoted one of his weekly sermons to explain his refusal, explaining that he does not want to interfere with Israel's internal political affairs.³⁰ Talking to his congregants he did not hide his opinion regarding the need for separation between state and religion in Israel as the only solution for the political turmoil there, but this, according to Silver, was an internal Israeli political issue, and it was not the religious agenda that should concern world Jewry as a whole. He explained the larger general Jewish agenda by laying out a universalistic interpretation of the Maccabean struggle. Differently from the common Israeli-Zionist version which interpreted the Maccabean struggle as a national struggle against

external non-Jewish enemies, Silver presented this struggle as a religious-moral one that was directed against the Hellenistic Jews. According to Silver's interpretation, the Maccabees had to contend with a phenomenon of Hellenistic Jews who formally (according to Halachic law) were considered as Jews, but in every other aspect behaved as pagans and turned their back on the Jewish code of moral life and commitment to social justice. This behavior, according to Silver, represented a most serious internal threat to the Jewish universalistic moral code, and thus, in the eyes of the Maccabees, there was no choice but to fight against it. The criterion used by the Maccabees in order to determine "who is a Jew" was not based on formal Halachic categories, but rather on the commitment to Jewish universalistic values. The conclusion that one had to draw from this interpretation of the Maccabees' story was that the real challenge for world Jewry was not the political and Halachic question of "Who is a Jew?" but the question of how to become better Jews, how to conduct one's life in accordance with the universalistic moral ideals of the Jewish Torah.

In many respects, this interpretation of the "who is a Jew" question was a daring and challenging Diaspora Zionist advocacy – one that gave priority to a continuous moral-religious spiritual revolution that takes place within each individual Jew – preparing him for a bold and persistent struggle in the service of the Jewish prophetic mission.³¹ In this context, Silver claimed that the real importance of Israel's founding was that it enabled a new understanding of Jewish Diaspora existence - not as a problematic or as a disadvantaged reality but rather as an ideal model for the accomplishment of the Jewish moral vision and universalistic mission.

His last Hanukkah sermon (before he passed away) was a most illuminating example for this intriguing universalistic Diaspora advocacy.³² Using a common Zionist motif, he emphasized the importance of the struggle of the few against the many, usually identified with the struggle of the Macabees against their Greek oppressors. However, significantly different from this last interpretation, Silver equated this Macabean struggle not with the Jewish fight for national independence, but with the minority status of Diaspora Jewry. Quoting Will Durant who claimed in his monumental book, *The Story of Civilization*, that human progress is always the product of the select few, he claimed that the mission of the Jewish people is closely related to their Diaspora minority status, and that now, with the foundation of Israel, the Jewish Diaspora has an opportunity and an obligation to fulfill this sacred destiny.

Silver described Jewish history as a long universalistic journey of a small Jewish minority through the pagan, the Christian and the Islamic worlds. He suggested that their great contributions to civilization were not in spite of their minority status but rather because of it:

For it is true that the precarious position of a minority, and the many disadvantages which its status imposes upon it, forces its members, if they wish to survive, to mobilize their best talents, and to rely upon their single intellectual and spiritual energies and inventiveness. Members of a minority group are prone to develop independence of judgment and a valuable patience and persistence. Because of what their group experienced, they are likely to entertain a greater passion for social righteousness, for brotherhood, for humanity, for peace.³³

According to Silver, rather than lamenting the fact that one belongs to a minority group, the Jewish people should see Israel's foundation as an opportunity to embrace their minority status and turn it into a social-religious commitment. They must look back to their past history with pride, understanding it as a heroic story of a people who were always faced by unfavorable odds, but were never fazed by it. They must understand that the minority status is in fact a universal reality, for almost every person may feel disadvantaged by adverse circumstances (race, religion, environment, lack of education, looks, convictions...), and when the odds are against him, he must take heart from the life experience of the Jewish people:

Bravery in wartime is commonplace... But courage in the face of day-long, year-long and life-long frustrations, injustices and discrimination is of an even higher order. To be fenced in on all sides by untoward circumstances, whether social, economic, racial or otherwise, and yet to remain unconfined and unimpaired in mind and spirit... that is to display manhood at its noblest.³⁴

Examining this favorable portrayal of the Diaspora minority status, one may conclude that despite his admiration for Ben-Gurion's leadership in conducting Israel's continuous existential struggles, Silver did not abandon his earlier determination to challenge Ben-Gurion's Israel-centered version of Zionism. On the contrary, realizing the futility of challenging the revered status of Ben-Gurion, he chose to see beyond the rivalry and to elevate Ben-Gurion's status even higher. By so doing he attempted to turn him into a

symbol of identification which is almost irrelevant to the day-to-day reality of Diaspora Judaism, and which may be reinterpreted and used as a basis for a very different universalistic Jewish agenda. One may conclude by saying that in Silver's eyes the further enhancement of Ben-Gurion's revered "founding father" status was at least in part a continuation of his earlier attempts to challenge Ben-Gurion's leadership. From his perspective as a Jewish Diaspora leader, the sacredness and legendary characteristics that now became an intrinsic part of Ben-Gurion's "founding father" image were both an expression of the post-1948 process that relegated Diaspora Zionist leaders to a peripheral status vis-à-vis Ben-Gurion, as well as a means of reversing this process by defining a new leading role to the Diaspora Zionist leadership.

¹ Despite Silver's centrality to American Zionist and Jewish history, just one biographical study has been published: Marc Lee Raphael, *Abba Hillel Silver, A Profile in American Judaism*, New York and London, 1989. Three other more recent publications which focus on Silver's thoughts and activities are: *Abba Hillel Silver and American Zionism* (Mark Raider, Jonathan Sarna and Ronald Zweig, ed.), London/Portland, Or., 1997; Zohar Segev, *From Ethnic Politicians to National Leaders: American Zionist Leadership, the Holocaust and the Establishment of Israel*, Sde Boqer, 2007, and Ofer Shiff, *The Defeated Zionist - Abba Hillel Silver and his attempt to transcend Jewish Nationalism*, Tel-Aviv, Resling Publishing, 2010

² For a comprehensive analyses of Silver rise to a leadership position during the 1930s and 1940s see: Zvi Ganin - Activists versus Moderates - the Wise-Silver Controversy in the 1940's, *Zionism*, Vol. 9, 1984: 317-358; David H. Shapiro, *From Philanthropy to Activism: the Political Transformation of American Zionism in the Holocaust Years, 1933-1945*, Oxford, 1994; Ofer Shiff, *The Defeated Zionist*, Part II: Chapters 1-6.

³ The Biltmore Conference was held on May 9-11, 1942 in New York, and in November of that year the Zionist General Council, convening in Jerusalem, approved the Biltmore Program, which thereby became the Zionist movement's official political platform. On the clashes that ensued between Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann: Yosef Gorni, *Partnership and Conflict: Chaim Weizmann and the Jewish Labour Movement in Palestine*, Tel Aviv, 1976, pp. 112-135; for an analysis of the speeches at the Biltmore Conference: Ariel Feldstein, *Gordian Knot*, pp. 18-20.

⁴ In September 1943 Silver was appointed co-chairman, together with Stephen Wise, of the AZEC. It was only in June 1945, after having stepped down for a period of six months, that he became AZEC's sole chair; in the eyes of many, this rendered Silver the undisputed leader of American Zionism and, in many respects, of American Jewry as a whole.

⁵ Allon Gal, *David Ben-Gurion and the American Alignment for a Jewish State, 1938-1941*. Bloomington, Indiana, 1991, pp. 19, 127-130

⁶ Shiff, *The Defeated Zionis*, Part II: chapter 4.

⁷ For examples of the scholarly debate generated by the conflict between the Diaspora-Zionist and the Israel-sovereign approaches, see: Yosef Gorni, "Negation of the Exile and its Centrality in Israel: between Nachum Goldmann and Ben-Gurion," *Gesher*, 145, 2004. For a discussion of the political dispute between the American Zionists and the Yishuv/Israeli leadership, see: Zohar Segev, *From Ethnic Politicians to National Leaders*; Ariel L. Feldstein, *Gordian Knot: David Ben-Gurion, The Zionist Organization and American Jewry, 1948-1963*, Sde Boqer, 2003; Gideon Shimoni, "the Ideological Debate in World Zionism since the Establishment of Israel," in: *The Challenge of Independence, Ideological and Cultural Aspects of Israel's First Decade*, Mordechai Bar-On (ed.), Jerusalem, 1999, pp. 104-132. On the tension between the Ben-Gurionist sovereign approach and the social Zionist vision, see: Nir Kedar, *Mamlakhtiyut: David Ben-Gurion's Civil Thought*, Jerusalem,

2009, pp. 80-83; Anita Shapira, "Silver and Ben-Gurion: Two Types of Leadership," in *Abba Hillel Silver and American Zionism*, p. 33 M.Z. Frank, "The Silver-Ben-Gurion Affair," *HaDo'ar*, 46/b, 11.11.1966, pp. 19-20

⁸ On the Diaspora-oriented approach to American Zionism, see: Allon Gal, "The Jewish Return to History in American Zionist Thought (1897-1967)," in *Zionism and the Return to History: a Reassessment* (S.N. Eisenstadt and Moshe Lissak, eds.), Jerusalem, 1999, pp. 361-389 (regarding Silver: 375-376); Ben Halpern, "The Americanization of Zionism," *American Jewish History*, 69, no. 1 (Sept. 1979), pp. 15-33.

⁹ Shabtai Tevet, *Kin'at David: the Life of David Ben-Gurion*, Vol 4, Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, 2004, pp. 852-903.

¹⁰ Emanuel Neumann, *In the Zionist Arena: an Autobiographical Memoir*, New York, 1976, pp. 190, 261; Noah Orian (Herzog), *The Leadership of Rabbi Aba Hillel Silver On the American Jewish Scene 1938-1949*, doctoral dissertation, Tel Aviv University, 1982, pp.408-412,442-443. Years later, on a celebration for Silver's 70th birthday (Tel-Aviv, 13.7.1963) Ben-Gurion expressed a very different view of this speech and praised it for its decisiveness. (Allon Gal and Ofer Shiff, "Abba Hillel Silver: Judaism and Zionism," *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel* 8, 1999, pp. 687-698)

¹¹ On the oppositional American Zionist activity after Israeli statehood, see: Zohar Segev, "American Zionists in Israel during the 1950s: Political Opposition and a Liberal Alternative," in *'Iyunim bi-Tequmat Yiśra'el*, vol. 12, 1991, pp. 493-494

¹² Three early versions of this "two centers speech" are: Silver, "Liberal Judaism in Relation to the State of Israel – 1948-1949", November, 1948, Abba Hillel Silver Papers, Microfilm Edition, Ben-Gurion Research Institute., Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Sde Boqer Campus (AHSP), V 182/752; "Founders' Day Address", Cincinnati, 1950; "The Future of the American Jewish Community", *CCARY* Vol. LX, (1950): 358-373. For a discussion of similar historiographical approaches within American Zionism, see: Allon Gal, "The Jewish Return to History in American Zionist Thought (1897-1967)", in *Zionism and the Return to History: a Reassessment* (S.N. Eisenstadt and Moshe Lissak, eds.), Jerusalem, 1999, 361-389 (regarding Silver: 375-376).

¹³ Silver presented the Synagogue as an institution that was created in the Diaspora, and as one which may best exemplify the Diaspora's historic contribution to the necessary integration of religion and Jewish nationality. For a similar discussion on the necessity in formulating a "New Zionism" after Israel's foundation, see: Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, New York, 1948; *A New Zionism*, New York, 1955. For a discussion of the American Zionist attempts to lay a new ideological foundation after Israel's foundation, see: Melvin I. Urofsky, *We are One!*, American Jewry and Israel, New York 1978, pp. 243-249.

¹⁴ Regarding the 23rd Zionist Congress' resolution, see: *The 23rd Zionist Congress, Stenographic Report*, Jerusalem, 1951, pp. 583-584

¹⁵ Zvi Ganin, *An Uneasy Relationship: American Jewish Leadership and Israel, 1948-1957*, Syracuse, 2005.

¹⁶ Correspondence between Ben-Gurion and Zalman Aran, Nov. 10, Nov. 13, Nov. 16, Dec. 5, 1952, Ben-Gurion Archive, Sde-Boker campus.

¹⁷ See for example, Silver's private correspondence with Elias Sourasky on January 24, 1956, AHSP I, 767.

¹⁸ See for example, Silver Assails Appeasement, October 30, 1956, AHSP V, 929/56-5; A Telegram from Silver to Ben-Gurion, Feb. 10, 1957, Silver Diary, AHSP V, 304.

¹⁹ The information about Silver's visit (21/3/56-5/4/56) appeared in the opening pages of all the major Israeli newspapers. About Silver's press conference, see for example: *Haboker*, 5/4/56, p. 3

²⁰ Silver, "My Trip to Italy and Israel", March 20, 1960, AHSP IV, 1033/954.

²¹ See for example: Silver, "Why Do Men Really Hate" (Purim, 1963) *A Word in its Season, Selected Sermons, Addresses and Writings of Abba Hillel Silver*, Vol. II, (Herbert Weiner, ed.) New York and Cleveland, 1972, p. 107

²² The basic features of Silver's universalistic Jewish approach existed throughout Silver's career, but it underwent a process of consolidation and refinement during the 1950s. The main publication in which Silver elucidated his approach was: *Where Judaism Differed: an Inquiry into the Distinctiveness of Judaism*, New York, 1956. See also: Silver, "Bridges and Walls," October 13, 1955, Abba Hillel Silver Papers, Microfilm Edition, Ben-Gurion Research Institute, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Sde Boqer Campus (AHSP), V 912; American Public Welfare Association, April 15-18, 1956, AHSP, V 938. On Silver's long held universalistic, Reform and progressive, views see: Michael Meyer, "Abba Hillel Silver as Zionist with the Camp of Reform Judaism," in *Abba Hillel Silver and American Zionism*, pp. 9-32; Hasia R. Diner, "Zion and America: the Formative Visions of Abba Hillel Silver,"

in *Abba Hillel Silver and American Zionism*, pp. 45-69; A. Goern, "Between Ideal and Reality: Abba Hillel Silver's Zionist Vision," in *Abba Hillel Silver and American Zionism*, pp. 71-86; Allon Gal, "The United States in Abba Hillel Silver's World View," *Michael* (15), 2000: 20-25.

²³ See for example: Silver, "On the Threshold of the Fourth Century", New York City, April 21 1953, AHSP V, 852; Silver, "Mr. Abraham Lincoln Looks over the Scene", Feb. 12, 1961, AHSP,IV 1044/965; Silver, "My Visit to the Soviet Union, Part I", Oct. 15, 1961, AHSP, IV 1049/970.

²⁴ Silver, "ZOA Convention Address", September 14, 1957, AHSP V, 949/57-8. See also under: "What We Must Always Remember – World Jewry – First Line of Israel's Defense", *The American Zionist*, October 1957, pp. 4-5.

²⁵ *Habboker*, October 4, 1957. (*Habboker* was the organ of the oppositional "General Zionist" party with which Silver was identified in the early 1950's)

²⁶ Silver, "The Return from a pilgrimage", May 4, 1958, AHSP IV, 1014/935

²⁷ Silver, "The Problem Which Lies Ahead", June 26, 1958, AHSPS V, 962/58-2

²⁸ A relevant important reading on this topic is Michael Meyer's article on the tension between Silver the Zionist and Silver the classic Reform Jew: See: "Abba Hillel Silver as Zionist with the Camp of Reform Judaism;" in *Abba Hillel Silver and American Zionism*, pp. 9-32

²⁹ AHSP I, Oct. 10, 1958, 322/5-1-25; Eliezer Ben-Refael, *Jewish Identities: Fifty Intellectuals Answer Ben-Gurion*, Leiden and Boston, 2002; Eliezer Don-Yehiya, "Religion, National Identity and Politics: the crisis over 'who is a Jew', 1958", in *On Both Sides of the Bridge – Religion and State in the Early Years of Israel*, Mordechai Bar-On and Zvi Zamert (eds.), Jerusalem, 2002, pp. 88-143 (Hebrew).

³⁰ Silver, "What is a Jew? The Answer of the Maccabees", December 7, 1958, AHSP, IV, 1018/939

³¹ For another example of this Diaspora Zionist doctrine, see: Silver, "ZOA Convention, Israel", July-September 1963, AHSP V, 1049/63-12

³² Silver, "When the Odds Are Against You", December 16, 1962, *A Word in its Season*, 83-88.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 85

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 88