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For Zionism, Socialism and the Kinship of All Peoples

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# Jabotinsky

## The Legend and Its Power

MARK BRUZONSKY

When Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin proudly rose in tribute to Ze'ev Vladimir Jabotinsky last November 11th in New York, he was also toasting himself as Jabotinsky's greatest disciple and successor. On that evening over two thousand American Jews gathered at Park Avenue's sparkling Waldorf-Astoria for this unprecedented black-tie, \$500-a-dollar extravaganza celebrating the Centennial of Jabotinsky's birth.

Earlier in the afternoon a hundred Jabotinsky Centennial Medals were awarded — mostly to American Jews active in Zionist politics, but also to such conservative champions of Israel as Moral Majority spokesman Jerry Falwell, the Reverend Billy Graham and politicians Henry Jackson, Jack Kemp and Elmo Zumwalt.

Such an unusual and lavish affair as this has a meaning far beyond simply honoring an indisputably towering Zionist figure. The entire event was a major political statement to world Jewry and to international society about Israeli policies and Zionist attitudes.

Begin's Herut party, the heir to that brand of Zionism known as revisionism which Jabotinsky founded in the mid-1930's, chose to mark the centenary of Jabotinsky's birth with a proclamation of revisionist Zionism's ideological victory in an ongoing, existential Jewish schism which has dominated Jewish destiny throughout this century.

It is a schism which even today bitterly divides Jewish personalities and organizations on such overriding issues as the future legitimacy of the Diaspora, the nature of Israeli society, the relationship between Israel and world Jewry, and Jewish attitudes toward resolving the Palestinian dilemma.

And so the Revisionists have finally crowned their Ze'ev Jabotinsky as heir to Theodore Herzl, greatest of Zionist prophets. In doing so they in effect are attempting to alter the line of succession which mainstream Zionism traces through Chaim

Weizmann, David Ben-Gurion and the liberal, socialist tradition.

Admittedly, very few observers of these developments really understand the immense importance they connote. And the all-too-often lackadaisical reporting in the daily press only briefly mentioned the event, and made little effort to seriously reveal its vital meaning.

Yet those most sensitive to the potency of ideological forces in history will appreciate how this much-trumpeted Jabotinsky Centennial carried within it profound clues to the basic attitudes and policies in the State of Israel not only today, but yesterday and tomorrow as well. The Carter Administration's Camp David "triumph" floundered partly because the motivating values of revisionist Zionism always remained obscure and impenetrable to the White House. During 1978 Carter even agreed to pay his respects to Jabotinsky with a stop for prayers at his gravesite in Jerusalem — an act highly but quietly criticized by those in his Administration who were aware that Begin would interpret Carter's gesture as an endorsement of Jabotinsky's uncompromising views. If the Reagan Administration is to have a successful Arab-Israeli policy it cannot afford to commit the same basic error.

For the Jabotinsky legend has an almost metaphysical power for a determined, but minority segment of the Holocaust generation of world Jewry — a segment whose importance was greatly buttressed when it achieved temporary political dominance of Israel with Herut's 1977 victory.

This legend of Jabotinsky — submerged and mostly forgotten so long as the Labor Party, revisionism's arch-rival, dominated Israeli politics — began to be reborn in 1977 when Begin rose from 30 years of political obscurity to head the Jewish State. The triumphant dinner on November 11th was a climax to the resurrection. And even if Labor succeeds in ousting Begin in the coming election, the Revisionists will continue to play a crucial role in Zionist politics from the opposition benches. Partly in preparation for such a likelihood, the Begin gov-

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ernment has determined to mount this worldwide campaign to anoint Ze'ev Jabotinsky before all of world Jewry with the mantle of Herzl's legitimacy.

For Zionism is in deepest essence a secularization of religion born in European anti-semitism and forged in the fires of the Hitlerian nightmare. Nurtured in this European society and foreseeing catastrophe for European Jewry, Jabotinsky came to embody Zionist determination to rise again — this time in the ancient homeland with an army for both protection and pride and a nationalism for unification.

This contemporary homage to Jabotinsky's teachings provides the essential backdrop to the contemporary political stage on which Israel's relations with both the Arab world and the West are being played out. The Jabotinsky legend is being brought back as a palliative for Israel's current diplomatic quagmire, as a rallying cry for those attempting to defy an ever more powerful world consensus demanding Palestinian self-determination and a division of historic Palestine under Jewish and Palestinian nationalisms.

In the opening decades of this century, it was Jabotinsky who forcefully preached no compromise with the Palestinian Arabs and no acceptance of the British and later United Nations concept of partitioning Palestine. It was Jabotinsky who insisted that the entire Jewish Diaspora — the Galut, the "Exile" as he termed it — must be liquidated, and that the Jewish "race" return to its rightful home in Eretz Yisrael, the Land of its birth. It was Jabotinsky who demanded that the soon-to-be created State of Israel be a colonial outpost of occidental civilization rather than a conglomerate society taking its place within the geography of the Orient. And it was Jabotinsky who required a novel, secular, disciplined form of Jewish "Monism" — a total, unquestioning devotion "to the only and single ideal of establishing a Jewish state" in which there would be "a Jewish majority on both sides of the Jordan."

Jabotinsky's profound influence on the present is best illustrated with the current West Bank/Gaza Strip "autonomy plan". "It was not the Americans who proposed this idea nor the Egyptians," Prime Minister Begin recently wrote in a letter chastizing a critical American Jewish liberal. "It was we, the Jews, the Zionists, the disciples of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who proposed this humanitarian idea"



"Jabotinsky, the ideologue"

— an idea straight from the heritage of revisionist Zionism. Jabotinsky himself actually put all this much more succinctly: "To the Palestinian Arabs as individuals — everything; to the Palestinian Arabs as a community — nothing!"

By 1937 the name Jabotinsky already epitomized the armed Jewish struggle against both Britain and the Palestinian Arabs. "Long live the Jewish State! Long live Jabotinsky!" shouted Shlomo Ben-Yosef seconds before swinging from the British gallows, Zionism's first martyr.

Jabotinsky had formally broken with mainstream Zionism in 1923 when he resigned from the Jewish Executive and founded Betar, the militant youth organization dedicated to emigration to Israel and which Begin was later to head in Poland. By 1925 Jabotinsky had founded the Revisionist Zionist movement as a faction within the World Zionist Organization demanding immediately a Jewish State on both sides of the Jordan River, in all of mandate Palestine.

Just a few years earlier Jabotinsky had been sentenced to 15 years at hard labor by a British military

court for his role in forming Jewish military squads. But following a worldwide storm of protest, Jabotinsky was amnestied by then British High Commissioner Sir Herbert Samuel.

While away from Palestine in 1930, the British authorities canceled Jabotinsky's return visa. He was to live out the rest of his life in Europe, finally dying in 1940 while on a visit to a Betar camp in the U.S. Jabotinsky's will stipulated that "my remains may not be transferred to Palestine except by order of a future Jewish government in that country." But due to his bitter feud with Ben-Gurion and his image as a radical, fascist zealot among most of the left-socialist core of Zionism it was not until 1964, when Ben-Gurion left power, that Jabotinsky's remains were reburied on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem.

In 1935, after the W.Z.O. allocated 50 percent of the seats on the Jewish Agency to non-Zionists, the Revisionists totally seceded from all mainstream Zionist institutions and founded the New Zionist Organization with Jabotinsky as President.

From these Revisionist-N.Z.O. roots grew the militant Irgun, destined to become a terrorist underground headed after 1943 by Menachem Begin and continually guided by the Jabotinsky commandment to "monism". The Irgun inevitably came into conflict with the Jewish Agency and its military arm, the Haganah. And the potential for civil war between Zionist factions arose a number of times during the upcoming decade — with Begin each time taking the crucial decision to yield.

Jabotinsky's personal magnetism, coupled with his dual conviction that European Jewry was heading toward catastrophe and that the struggle with the Palestinian Arabs could only be determined by force, all combined to cast an aura of visionary about him. Furthered by his exile, the Jabotinsky legend expanded, confirmed by the Holocaust's unfolding, the British retrenchment from the Balfour Declaration, and the Palestinian Arab revolt against Jewish designs.

Writing this year for the occasion of Jabotinsky's centenary, Prime Minister Begin looks with the following thoughts:

It was the summer of 1940 . . . . A cry went up to heaven the likes of which had not been heard since God created man, and man created the devil: *why had we not hearkened to the call of Jabotinsky?* For indeed, when the Jewish masses were standing on the brink of the abyss, it was he who appeared

before them . . . as a man bearing the message of redemption, and pointing the way to rescue . . . .

However, led astray by their leaders, they refused to listen . . . . And when he died — there died with him the hope itself. How would we be able to continue living without him? How would we find our way in the murky darkness that surrounded us? Would we know without him how to save our people, liberate its land and give it a State of its own?

Later in the same article, Begin demonstrates the lasting import of the Jabotinsky legend:

During the days of the Holocaust and destruction and subjugation, we did as you [Jabotinsky] commanded us: *We rose, we revolted and we liberated.* Even though the road may be long and difficult, we shall continue to carry out your teachings — the integrity of the Homeland, the Return to Zion, the unity of the Jewish people, freedom for the individual, justice in society — unto the last day of our life on earth, until, with God's help, we shall implement them.

Beyond any doubt, Jabotinsky was a brilliant, highly talented personality who was conversant in numerous languages and at home in cosmopolitan society. "He was intellectually ten times as great as Begin," recalls one of American Jewry's most honored leaders who prefers to remain anonymous for obvious reasons.

Loved by some, admired by many, despised by others, Jabotinsky remains a figure still capable of eliciting devotion and hatred. Yet even his ideological enemies often look back with mixed attitudes. For instance, former Foreign Ministry Director-General in the last Labor government, Shlomo Avneri, currently professor of Political Science at Hebrew University, writes of Jabotinsky with sincere admiration. "Jabotinsky was a polished European gentleman towering above other Zionist leaders between the World Wars in his cultural attainments, sensibilities, and intellectual horizons." Yet, Avneri concludes, history has proved "the utter failure of Jabotinsky's theoretical and strategic doctrine."

Like Herzl, Jabotinsky was a Jewish secularist manifesting little interest in religion or even Jewish culture. Yet he became the supreme Jewish nationalist of the entire era, surpassing even Herzl in the boldness of his dreams and the zealotry of their pursuit. In his *Autobiography*, Jabotinsky offers a crude explanation for his early conversion to

Zionism. After attending a lecture on socialist Zionism by Nachum Syrkin while studying in Berne, Jabotinsky wrote, "I do not know if I am a socialist since I have not yet acquainted myself with this doctrine; but I have no doubt I am Zionist, because the Jews are a very nasty people, their neighbors hate them, and they are right; its end in the Diaspora will be another Bartholomew's Night, and the only hope is immigration to Palestine."

Viewing nationalism as the supreme value — "There is no value in the world higher than the nation and the fatherland" — and believing that "Every race possessing a definite uniqueness seeks to become a nation . . . because only in its own state will it feel comfortable" — Jabotinsky evolved a form of realpolitik Jewish militarism valuing discipline and single-mindedness above all else.

"In the epoch about to begin," Jabotinsky warned, "we have no place and no use for a complex creature, contemplating his own soul and minutely measuring all its feelings, their length and depth and intensity."

Instead, in a 1933 article *On Militarism*, Jabotinsky proclaimed,

There is nothing in the world as impressive as the ability of a mass of human beings to feel and act, at certain moments, as one entity, imbued with one will, in one rhythm. This is the difference between a multitude, a mob — and a nation.

Jabotinsky went on to dismiss classical liberal humanism as both falacious and dangerous. "Stupid is the person who believes in his neighbor, good and loving as the neighbor may be," Jabotinsky penned. "Stupid is the person who relies on justice," he continued, "Justice

exists only for those whose fists and stubbornness make it possible for them to realise it . . . Do not believe anyone, be always on guard, carry your stick always with you — this is the only way of surviving in this wolfish battle of all against all.

Understandably, the militant Irgun looked to Jabotinsky for both truths and justifications — especially after the 1939 British White Paper put a ceiling on Jewish immigration at the very time European Jewry's desperation was climaxing. The revolt against the British in the '40s was guided by Jabotinsky's monistic vows and built on his unyielding determination. Irgun debates over terrorism — which established "the pattern of terrorism adopted

30 years later by al-Fatah" according to leftist Zionist historian Simha Flapan in his latest study *Zionism and the Palestinians* — were nurtured in the Jabotinsky legend of defiance.

But for all of Jabotinsky's brilliance and prophetic correctness, he seriously failed to foresee two crucial developments which still today ominously threaten the entire edifice created by Zionism.

First, Jabotinsky failed to recognize that the re-born Israel would bring in Jews on *aliyah* mostly from the East with the bulk of Diaspora Jewry remaining wedded to their own national homes in the West. Jabotinsky simply did not perceive that cultural blending of West and Levant was Israel's destiny. "The East," Jabotinsky once confided, "It is entirely foreign to me . . . Mine is a Westerner's mentality!"

And yet Israel's future will partially depend upon Zionism's ability to adjust to social tensions from within as well as eventually to foster acceptance from the Arab world from without. So far, Israel's internal cohesion has been partially maintained as a result of the constant external challenge. The peace with Egypt only inaugurates what is sure to be an extended and fragile process of accommodation.

Even more threatening is the Jabotinskyite failure



"Jabotinsky, the militant"

to appreciate the depth and resiliency of Palestinian nationalism — in part as nurtured by Zionism itself. While Jabotinsky presciently understood that “It is utterly impossible to obtain the voluntary consent of the Palestinian Arabs for converting ‘Palestine’ from an Arab country into a country with a Jewish majority,” he always assumed that Palestinian nationalism would become submerged within Pan-Arabism, would remain fragmented, and that the dominance of Western power over the “backward nations” of the Arab East would continue unabated.

In his stunningly eloquent testimony before the Peel Commission in 1937, Jabotinsky stated his views with clarity:

It is quite understandable that the Arabs of Palestine also prefer to be the Arab state No. 4, or No. 6 — that I quite understand. But when the Arab claim is confronted with our Jewish demand to be saved, it is like the claims of appetite versus the claims of starvation.

Jabotinsky simply did not foresee the Muslim world becoming a serious threat to Jewish nationalism. And for this reason he paid scant attention to Islam and Arab sensibilities. In the early '30s Jabotinsky wrote:

There are perhaps 100 million people or more who believe in Islam. But Islam as a unified factor in international relations does not exist. . . . Today, as a hundred years ago, one can clash with every and any Muslim nation without becoming entangled in a confrontation with Pan-Islamism.

Yet only a decade later the newly proclaimed State of Israel was invaded from all sides by Arab armies. And today's tenuous peace with Egypt remains threatened by the apparently unbridgeable roadblocks over Palestinian rights.

Jabotinsky continued, in his testimony before the Peel Commission:

The idea is that Palestine on both sides of the Jordan should hold the Arabs, their progeny, and many millions of Jews. What I do not deny is that in that process the Arabs of Palestine will necessarily become a minority in the country. I do deny that *that* is a hardship. It is not a hardship on any race, any nation, possessing so many National States in the future. One fraction, one branch of that race, and not a big one, will have to live in someone else's State: Well, that is the case with all the mightiest nations in the world.

Here then are the historical ideological roots for today's “autonomy” formula, as interpreted by Jabotinsky's legions, for the “Arabs of The Land of Israel.” But such an “autonomy” as defined by the Revisionists is firmly opposed by the socialist Zionist camp because it appears to condemn Israel to indefinite rule over a substantial Arab minority whose national longings seem to feed on Zionist chains. Indeed, with the Revisionist interpretation of “autonomy” Israel stands almost totally alone, largely because the Begin approach stems from Jabotinsky's world while international society today, including the U.S. and Egypt, accepts the principle of self-determination and the Palestinian dilemma as one of nationalism.

And so, when on November 11th in New York Jabotinsky's modern disciples read from his writings, quoted from his speeches, and bowed to his commands. Yet there were numerous notable omissions from the podium at the Waldorf-Astoria; for quite a few of American Jewry's luminaries refused to lend their legitimacy to this event and to its message.

And when the gala festivities of the Centennial year were completed, Jabotinsky remained of his time and not of ours. The great Zionist prophet's errors and mistakes will cast their pale over all of his accomplishments. And though Jabotinsky's teachings in many cases ring true in terms of the realities he knew in the Europe and Levant of yesterday, they seem to many but false prophecies when applied to the world of today and tomorrow.

Through the dangerous maze of contemporary problems the Jabotinsky legend does not and cannot show the way. Only a new generation of Zionist and Diaspora leaders can possibly accomplish that imperative task. But just as in the United States, leadership and greatness are extreme rarities in the Israel of today.

Jabotinsky, the giant figure from the Zionist past, is being honored as a political messiah because his far less distinguished disciples are unsure how to approach the future. And that more than anything else explains the current attempt to portray Jabotinsky's dated and erroneous ideas as a political Bible, and further explains contemporary Judaism's nagging awareness that the Jewish future is still in serious doubt. ◇