

INTRODUCTION

“The Zionists are shameless and importunate; I have a hard time adopting the appropriate position in each instance, considering that I am, of course, well-disposed to the cause.”¹ This is how Albert Einstein defined his relationship to the Zionist movement in a letter to his close friend and fellow physicist Paul Ehrenfest in the spring of 1922. By then he had been associated with Zionism for more than three years, and had even crossed the Atlantic and toured the United States for the first time as part of a Zionist delegation. Einstein’s exasperation with the demands of this ideological movement is patently clear in his statement. Yet his sympathy to the cause is also decidedly evident.

This quotation is indicative of the delicate relationship between Einstein and the Zionist movement, as well as of his own internal struggle as to how he should relate to a political cause that made demands on his time and energy and for which he felt considerable affinity. Yet how far did Einstein’s commitment to Jewish nationalism extend? Was he, indeed, a fully fledged Zionist? Did he accept all the tenets of Zionist ideology, or did he maintain a certain distance from the movement and its leaders? How did Einstein become affiliated with a political organization that strove to establish a Jewish state in the British Mandate for Palestine? How much of his time and effort did this most prominent of scientists dedicate to Zionism, and what activities was he prepared to undertake on its behalf? What kind of relationships did he establish with the prominent German and international Zionist leaders of the movement? Which Zionist projects was he specifically interested in? How did he reconcile his support for

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Zionism with his well-known disdain for all forms of nationalism? What type of political entity did he envisage for the Jewish and Arab populations in Palestine, and how did he react to the mounting inter-ethnic violence in the region? How was he perceived by the leaders and the rank and file of the Zionist movement? Did he assume the role of a Zionist icon or iconoclast? These are the central issues dealt with in this book.

This study tackles one topic that is highly controversial, Zionism, and another that has largely been forgotten, Einstein's affiliation with Jewish nationalism. Prior to 1967, the consensus among historians of Zionism was to stress its "epic struggle for survival and supremacy against implacable, antisemitic and murderous enemies."² The incisive divisions in Israeli society in the aftermath of the Six Days' War also brought the first cracks in that historical consensus.³ The public dispute over Zionism spread to the international arena and perhaps reached an all-time high in 1975, when the UN passed the controversial "Zionism is Racism" resolution.⁴ The contentious debate on Zionist and Israeli history has intensified even more since the late 1980s. Work by a group of Israeli scholars termed the "new" or "post-Zionist" historians has stimulated acrimonious discussion of Zionist history in general and the Israeli government's treatment of its Arab minority in particular. These publications have created a sharp division between those "who insist on discussing Zionism and Israel, warts and all" and those "who prefer more traditional and sympathetic interpretations of Israel's stance."⁵

Because of this very emotional public debate and the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, it is well-nigh impossible to discuss any topic related to Zionism with complete impartiality. Nevertheless, I have tried to approach this specific historical case study with a maximum amount of objectivity. I am well aware of the potential for exploiting my conclusions for propagandistic purposes. If this study finds that Einstein was indeed a Zionist, will that enhance the legitimacy of Zionism? Conversely, if I conclude that he was not a Zionist, will that be a moral victory for those who oppose Zionism? Even though I concur with those who do not believe that value-free history actually

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exists,⁶ I will leave the propaganda to others, focus on the historical sources, and strive to be as objective as possible.

This book also explores what Einstein's association with the Zionist movement says about his relationship to his Jewish identity in general. How did he see himself as a Jew and as a member of the Jewish people? How did he view German Jewry, Western Jewry, and the Jews from Eastern Europe? What was his impression of the Jewish masses he encountered in the United States and of the new Jewish community in Palestine? Which political, social, and cultural developments that affected his fellow coreligionists did he view favorably, and which did he disapprove of?

This book also examines Einstein's Zionism in the context of his political outlook and his general views on nationalism. How did Einstein define nationalism? What were his opinions on German nationalism, and what impact did these attitudes have on his perception of Zionism? How did Einstein feel in Germany in light of both his status as a member of the academic establishment and as a target of anti-Semitic attacks? How did his opinions on Zionism and nationalism fit in with his general political worldview?

This book deals with Einstein's association with the Zionist movement during the European period of his life. Specifically, it covers the years between 1919 and 1933. The year 1919 saw Einstein burst onto the world stage as an international figure following the verification of his general theory of relativity by British astronomers. After Hitler's rise to power in January 1933, Einstein decided never to return to Germany, and by the end of that year he had emigrated to the United States and settled in Princeton, New Jersey.

Einstein hardly figures in general histories of Zionism. Such works as do mention him in passing have referred to him as one of the "eminent people outside the orbit of Zionism" recruited for the Zionist cause,⁷ as a supporter of Chaim Weizmann during his 1921 U.S. tour,⁸ as a "participant" in the Zionist Federation of Germany and as being present at the Constituent Assembly of the Jewish Agency in August 1929,⁹ and as an opponent of the creation of a Jewish state and a supporter of a binational solution in the Middle East.¹⁰ Even in works

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specifically dedicated to Zionism in Germany, references to Einstein are rare: one major work fails to mention him entirely;¹¹ another cites a visit by Weizmann to Einstein in 1925, a speech given by him at a rally on behalf of the Palestine Foundation Fund the following year, and his role in the internal dispute within the German Zionist Federation over the most suitable response to the outbreak of violence in Palestine in August 1929.¹² These scant references testify to Einstein's marginal role in Zionist historiography.

To date, there have been no monographs on Einstein's affiliation with Zionism. Two collections dedicated exclusively to Einstein's writings on Zionism have been published: *About Zionism*, which was edited by the veteran Zionist official Leon Simon in 1930, and *Einstein on Israel and Zionism: His Provocative Ideas about the Middle East*, which was compiled by the New York journalist Fred Jerome in 2009.¹³ In addition, an anthology of Einstein's political writings includes a substantial section titled "Anti-Semitism and Zionism, 1919–1930."¹⁴ However, none of these collections offers an extensive analysis of Einstein's affinity with the Zionist movement.

In general, Einstein's association with Zionism has been examined in two very different types of publications: biographical studies, which deal inter alia with this topic as part of a comprehensive discussion of Einstein's life and work, and scholarly articles, which either pertain exclusively to this topic or deal with it as part of an analysis of Einstein's Jewish identity. The majority of the biographical studies have been written either by colleagues or close associates of Einstein or, in more recent years, by journalists. A handful of German Jewish and American Jewish historians have written brief articles on the subject of Einstein and Zionism, yet have usually based their conclusions on limited published material. No extensive studies of Einstein's Jewish identity or of his affinity to Zionism have been authored by professional historians.

In these works, Zionism's appeal for Einstein has been attributed to various causes: to the primordial bond he allegedly felt with the Jewish people,¹⁵ to his concern for the dire plight of Eastern European Jewry in the aftermath of World War I and Zionism's plan to

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offer them a refuge in Palestine,¹⁶ to the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany during and immediately after the war,¹⁷ to his disdain for the “undignified mimicry” of his fellow coreligionists in Berlin and his rejection of assimilation as a solution to the “Jewish problem,”¹⁸ to his antipathy toward German nationalism,¹⁹ to his sense of “solidarity with outsiders as an outsider,”²⁰ and to the beneficial effect Zionism would presumably have on restoring pride and self-respect to Western Jewry.²¹

Widely varying theories have also been proposed to define the nature of Einstein’s role in the Zionist movement. At one end of the spectrum he has been ascribed Messiah-like qualities in “preaching” nationalism to the Jewish masses²² and has been described as a “spiritual head” of the Jewish people.²³ He has been defined as a “Zionist leader”²⁴ and as “an ardent advocate of Zionism.”²⁵ A prominent head of the movement termed him a Zionist, although admitting there were definite limits to his Zionism because of his idiosyncratic personality.²⁶ A recent biographer dubbed him “the Wandering Zionist,” yet simultaneously claimed that “his allergy to nationalism kept him from being a pure and unalloyed Zionist.”²⁷ Others have viewed Einstein’s Zionism as akin to the cultural Zionism of the ideologue Ahad Ha’am.²⁸ A recent article defines Einstein’s Zionism as a “syncretistic private Zionism, which is not subsumed to any political strategy or organizational discipline.”²⁹ And in the abovementioned recent anthology of Einstein’s writings on Zionism, he is seen as having “mixed feelings about Zionism.”³⁰ At the other end of the spectrum, Zionism and Palestine have been viewed as being “only peripheral concerns” for Einstein;³¹ his advocacy of Zionism has been described as “limited,”³² and the notion that he was a Jewish nationalist has even been dismissed as “ridiculous.”³³ He has also been characterized as a “sympathizing non-Zionist.”³⁴

These previous studies on Einstein’s relationship to Jewish nationalism are not extensive and often make generalizations based on very limited source material. Consequently, ambiguities and contradictions in Einstein’s positions have often been overlooked. In contrast, in this book I am committed to avoiding such generalizations and intend to

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subject the available materials to a meticulous examination. Such a careful study of Einstein's writings, correspondence, and third-party materials should help illuminate the ambiguities and contradictions in his attitudes, beliefs, and actions in regard to his support for Zionism. Moreover, I am of the opinion that such a detailed study will reveal how Einstein could sometimes change his mind on various issues literally from one day to the next.

Consequently, this study constitutes a major departure from previous studies on Einstein and Zionism in a number of highly significant ways: its analysis is both far deeper, delving into the major emotional, social, and cultural factors that led to Einstein's subsequent affinity for the Zionist movement, and also far more meticulous, examining certain key issues in his relationship to the movement with great regard to details, nuances, and ambiguities. Moreover, the analysis is grounded in a vast plethora of archival material, much of which has not previously been utilized for a study of Einstein and Zionism, and at the same time it is far more expansive than extant studies in both examining the major factors that contributed to Einstein's mobilization on behalf of Zionism from his earliest years till his young adulthood and in offering an extensive analysis of Einstein's interaction with the Zionist movement from his induction into the movement until the end of his Berlin years.

In a wider context, this work provides a reinterpretation and substantial expansion of the Jewish and Zionist aspects of Einstein's biography. It contributes to the demythologization of Einstein by juxtaposing the real historical figure of the prominent physicist with his public image. It also adds to the general reconstruction of Einstein as an authentic individual and helps rescue him both from the popular myth, in which he is merely perceived as a genius, and from the narrow focus of historians of science, to whom only his contributions to science appear noteworthy. It should also enhance our understanding of why Zionism appealed to those who, like Einstein, were essentially outsiders vis-à-vis the movement.

In my analysis of Einstein's relationship to the Zionist movement, I have drawn amply from the rich historical sources housed at the Al-

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bert Einstein Archives at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and with the Einstein Papers Project at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena. I have delved into critical materials held at the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem and the personal papers of major Zionist figures such as Chaim Weizmann and Louis D. Brandeis. I have also availed myself of important sources at official German repositories. In addition, I have made extensive use of the press coverage of Einstein's Zionist-related activities and of the memoirs of central figures with whom he was in contact as a consequence of his involvement in Zionism.

Nevertheless, this study makes no claim to be exhaustive or all-inclusive. Because of the sheer mass of available materials relevant to Einstein's involvement in the Zionist movement during the period under discussion, I could not scrutinize every single aspect of his engagement with the same level of intensity. Therefore, I have consciously chosen specific events and issues I believe to be crucial in elucidating Einstein's involvement in the Zionist movement during his European years. I preface my analysis of his association with Zionism with an introductory chapter that surveys the decisive factors in Einstein's family background, childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood that, in my opinion, led to the radical ideological transformation in his position vis-à-vis Jewish nationalism in the aftermath of World War I. This beginning is followed by an inquiry into Einstein's mobilization and induction into the Zionist movement in 1919 and his first actions on behalf of Zionism. I then examine Einstein's first trip to the United States, in the spring of 1921, when he visited as a member of a Zionist delegation and unwittingly played a key role in the explosive conflict between Zionist leaders Chaim Weizmann and Louis D. Brandeis over funding for the settlement of Palestine. Einstein's tour of the land of his forefathers in the winter of 1923 is considered next; I focus on his inaugural lecture at the future site of the Hebrew University and his reception by both the Jewish and Arab communities and his British and Zionist hosts. I then turn to Einstein's role in the establishment and early development of his pet Zionist project, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. This is followed

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by an examination of Einstein's reaction to the mounting violence in the burgeoning Arab-Jewish conflict in Palestine. His break with the executive body of the Hebrew University in 1928 initially left him severely disillusioned over the future course of the nascent institution, but eventually reforms were put into place that would guarantee his renewed support. In a final chapter, I bring together all the relevant evidence and present my conclusions about Einstein's association with the Zionist movement during his European years.