Zionism originated in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This ideology was part of the so-called “nationalities” movement, through which people oppressed by states or empires attempted to free themselves and constitute their own nation states. The two key dates for the beginnings of Zionism are 1881 and 1897. With the “Lovers of Zion” movement in 1881, the “first aliyah” began – the first organized, collective wave of Jewish immigrants in Israel (or Palestine); the following year, Leon Pinsker published his manifesto, Auto-Emancipation. Six years later, in 1897, Theodor Herzl chaired the first Zionist Congress in Basel. The end of the century is also the time when the major Zionist thinkers wrote and published their seminal texts, and when important debates were held on the content and aims of Zionist ideology.

How to define the original goals of Zionism? In my opinion they can be divided into three categories.

The first goal of this ideology, and of the political movement that attempted to implement it, was to end the Jewish Diaspora – the dispersion of Jewish people throughout the world – and to bring them (or return them) to Israel. This is currently referred to as the “Ingathering of the Exiles.” Original Zionism claims in no uncertain terms the end of the dispersion and the complete reversal of the Diaspora. For religious Zionists, such as Rabbi Reines and later Rabbi Kook, it was about the end of the exile: the messianic process at the core of Judaism was under way, and man’s actions (the return to the homeland) would fulfil God’s will to
end the suffering of the Jewish people. As the end of the Exile approaches and we witness the “beginning” of messianic times, Jewish people must return to Israel to practice the divine commandments and rebuild a whole, complete life on the biblical promised land. For non-religious Zionists, who do not believe in the notions of fault, exile, and divine castigation or “punishment” of the Jewish people for their sins, Zionism was essentially about ending the unnatural situation in which diaspora Jews live. As a result of anti-Semitism and persecutions, pogroms and expulsions, diaspora Jews adopted demeaning, decadent, and contrived behaviors, personality traits, and lifestyles which lead them to a life on the margins: for example, they dedicated themselves solely to intellectual professions, they detached themselves from nature, abstained from all physical activity, disdained all manual work, dealt with loans and money, etc. It has often been noted how the Zionist descriptions of diaspora Jews are similar to anti-Semitic representations. Jewish people in the Diaspora would be induced to impurity, greed, wickedness, sloth, speculative thought, etc. The return to Israel would represent the normalization or regeneration of the Jewish nation, so that it can be “like the others,” including “policemen and prostitutes.” According to original Zionism, the reversal of the Diaspora was paramount: at the end of the gathering process in Israel, whatever remained of the Diaspora would be assimilated, lost, or it would disappear one way or another.

It seems that in time this Zionist goal was mostly achieved. Consecutive waves of Jewish people arrived in Palestine all throughout the twentieth century, which had not happened before: the second **aliyah** (1905), the third one (1918), the fourth (1924), and the fifth (1933); the Shoah survivors; the mass **aliyah** from the Arabic countries (in the Fifties); Jewish people from the communist countries after the de-Stalinization; Jewish people from Egypt; and the latest waves of immigration: the Jews from the post-Soviet Union countries, and Ethiopian Jews. In this sense, reality met the ideal: it seems that Herzl was quite right to say, “If you will it, it is no dream....”

The second goal of Zionism, aside from gathering Jewish people in one territory, was the creation of a Jewish sovereign state. We know that according to Theodor Herzl – the visionary founder and main representative of Zionism – this was the main and basically sole objective of the movement: to obtain a charter from the great powers that allowed
Jewish people to create their own nation-State, like other people had done (Italy, Germany), or were going to do – an independent state, with a government, a parliament, courts, an army, and a police force, and all the political and sovereign features of a state. In 1917, the Balfour Declaration started the process of recognition, as it gave Palestinian Jews home rule, enabling them to create their own pre-state institutions. In 1942, at the Biltmore Conference, David Ben-Gurion reiterated that the goal of Zionism was to build a state recognized by the international community, which would take its place among other nations. In 1947, the UN General Assembly legally endorsed its formation, and on May 14, 1948, Ben-Gurion proclaimed the establishment of the new state. In addition to this nation-building goal was the revival of Hebrew language and culture as one of the essential elements of the new society.

But Zionism had also a third (moral, spiritual, and cultural) goal: to forge in Israel a new Jewish man, strong, healthy and free, both typical and universal, to be an example for other nations; a man whose figure, ethics and intellect would be admired by other people, and who would herald a model society in his image, a Jewish state that would be “a Light Unto the Nations.” Not all Zionist thinkers shared this goal. “Proto-Zionists” such a Rabbi Alkalay and Rabbi Kalischer focused only on the return of Jewish people to the Holy Land and the establishment of Jewish institutions in Palestine; “constructivist” Zionists had mostly material accomplishments in mind, such as creating Jewish towns and villages in Palestine and toiling the land; and political Zionists, following Herzl, strived for diplomacy and for a Jewish state recognized by the international community.

Thus, the goals of Zionism were threefold: population (the transferring of diaspora people to Palestine), politics (the building of a sovereign state), and spirituality (the revival of the Jewish people and the forging of a “new Jewish man”).

At the time of writing, in 2011, it is exactly thirty years after the creation of the Lovers of Zion and the first aliyah, which marked the beginnings of the Zionist movement. We shall ask the question of what has and has not been achieved of the original goals of Zionism; in other words, we shall compare ideal and reality.

The main undertaking of the Zionist movement was political: the creation of a sovereign Jewish state in Israel, on May 14, 1948. David Ben-Gurion’s proclamation of the newborn state was the main achievement of
Zionism, but achieving international recognition of the state, and surviving the attacks it was subject to, were equally important. From the legal point of view, the resolution of November 29, 1947 that decided the division of Palestine in a Jewish and an Arab state was the international community’s endorsement of the creation of the State of Israel. This decision was validated by admitting Israel to the UN in 1949, and afterward through all the UN resolutions which reminded the world, and particularly the Arab world, that it was absolutely necessary that Israel exist within certain and recognized boundaries. The peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan were an essential step in this direction, as well as the Oslo accords. With the latter, the Palestine Liberation Organization (then Palestinian Authority) recognized the existence of the State of Israel (albeit within the pre-1967 conflict borders). We can also note the “promise of recognition” and normalization of relations with Israel (pending Israel’s complete retreat from the territories occupied in 1967) implicit in the Arab League’s Peace Initiative proposed by Saudi Arabia. Comparing the current situation with 1948, Israel’s objective of being recognized by the majority of the world countries has largely been attained. Between 1948 and 2011, there was a true reversal of the situation. It is true that there are some international entities that reject the existence of the Jewish state, mostly Iran and fundamentalist Islamic movements – Al Qaida, Hezbollah, Hamas, and others – but they are the exception to the rule.

From the point of view of resistance, the physical survival of the state was endangered on only two occasions: the so-called “Independence” war in 1948-1949 and the Yom Kippur war in 1973. In these two cases, Zionism could have ended with the obliteration of the Jewish state. In 1948, the Arab armies joined against Israel and could have nipped the fledgling state in the bud (even if several studies have established that, for a number of reasons, the limited Jewish army had more chances of victory than the Arab armies). In 1973, Egypt and Syria’s surprise attack represented a mortal danger for Israel in the first days of the offensive, even if after a relatively short time the Tsahal (the Israel Defense Forces) regained the advantage. The other Israeli wars – Suez, 1967, the intifadas, Lebanon, etc. – did not actually challenge the survival of the state, regardless of Israel’s anxiety (especially before the Six Days War). Today, even if the dangers of war persist, and even if Iran talks of erasing Israel from the map, we must admit that the existence of the Jewish state seems assured.
While this fundamental goal of Zionism has been achieved, the basic controversy between the two Zionist ideologies – the socialist and the revisionist, Ben-Gurion’s and Jabotinsky’s, dove or falcon, partial or total – has not yet been resolved.

Was Zionism content with having a Jewish state “in Palestine,” or did it aim for Jewish sovereignty over the whole of Israel? In other words, had political Zionism already been achieved with the creation of a “partial” Jewish state in 1948, or was this just the first stage before conquering the whole biblical territory? Up until 1967, the majority of the Zionist movement supported the first position; in 1937, at the time of the Peel Commission’s visit to Palestine, and at the time of the 1974 UN decision, the elected leaders of Zionism officially accepted the division. On the other hand, the Betar (revisionist) movement proposed by Jabotinsky, and subsequently by Begin, demanded the “two banks of the Jordan River” but represented just a minority of the Zionist movement. But since the conquest of the West Bank and Gaza during the Six Days War and the proliferation of Jewish settlements and localities in these territories, the question is asked once more and continues to divide Zionism. It is a fundamental question: will Zionism be considered as definitively “achieved” only when Israel is in charge of all the occupied territories? First of all, we can argue that the “revisionist” current itself soon abandoned the idea of a state that would extend beyond the eastern bank of the Jordan River into contemporary Jordan. Then, the total evacuation of Gaza in 2005 erased any future chance to reclaim this territory. Finally, even Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – the contemporary supporter of the Jabotinskian movement of “the Whole Land” – accepted the principle of the two States in Israel in his “Bar-Ilan Speech,” even if their borders, for now, remain ambiguous. The settlement issue remains: can we consider West Bank residents as the “continuers” of the work of the first Zionists? Or is there no difference between the work of the first Zionists and the fight carried on by the colonists, as claimed by the Israeli Right?

As for the “Ingathering of the Exiles,” it has been achieved for the most part, but still only in part. It is true that some Jewish diaspora communities have been completely “emptied” and their members or their children have found a place in Israel. Nevertheless, some Jewish communities, such as the one in Algeria, are not moving to Israel, but to other countries. The last two waves of immigration into Israel (Soviet and Ethiopian Jews) have in
some ways concluded the process of Jewish emigration to Israel. There are no other major “reservoirs” of Jewish people outside of Israel that are likely to initiate a mass aliya. There may be more Jewish people arriving from the ex-Soviet Union, but not in large numbers. The three “major” Western Jewish communities, United States, France, and United Kingdom, will continue on average to contribute to the emigration process to Israel, but in low numbers. We cannot of course exclude an anti-Semitic revival in these countries that may prompt a new wave of departures, but the likelihood of a “mass” migration is extremely low.

We shall state it clearly: original Zionism was wrong on this point. Jewish diaspora communities are there to stay, and on the current map there are no more populations likely to relocate to Israel. The assimilation process will continue at its own pace, mixed marriages (Jewish-Christian) will increase, and Jewish identity will undoubtedly become more and more diluted in the Diaspora; but the idea of the Zionist “triumph,” a definitive end to the Diaspora, is not believable anymore. From the beginning, it has been a flawed and utopian idea.

The Zionist movement ended up acknowledging this, and stopped seeing the aliya as its one and only objective. The encouragement to migrate to Israel remains a major component of Zionism, but it is no longer the only one. Furthermore, the Zionist organization set as its objective to contribute to Jewish identity in the Diaspora by reinforcing Jewish culture and education. Being a Zionist no longer means wanting to live in Israel, but rather seeing in the State of Israel a central element of the Jewish identity. In 2011, to be a Zionist is to defend the existence of the State of Israel, to help persecuted Jews to settle there, to maintain a constant interest in what happens in those countries, and to help Israeli people confront the campaign to delegitimize the Jewish state; and even – for many diaspora Jews – to have a secondary residence in Israel, children who study there, or travel there frequently. In a way, Zionism has become “diluted” compared to its original objective, but I would rather call this Zionism’s “adaptation” to the reality of things.

But now we need to ask the question of whether Zionism failed or succeeded in terms of content. As I mentioned earlier, Zionist ideology did not limit itself to demanding the gathering of the exiles and the creation of a Jewish state, but saw this process as necessarily leading to the creation of a new Jewish individual, the pillar of a model state, a “light
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I. Greilsammer

unto the nations.” Even if we do not follow the extreme views of Martin Buber, who saw Zionism as having immense cultural and moral ambitions – the rebuilding of Jewish civilization and its unity, the reuniting of the private and public dimensions which Judaism in exile had separated, the promotion of an altruistic, ethical, and universalist view of society – it is certain that the founders dreamt of an ideal state. Has the reality of Zionist achievements met these expectations? The response must be nuanced. Despite all the criticisms we could raise against Israeli society, the fact remains that it is a democratic society, which is not negligible. Jewish and Arab Israeli people freely elect their representatives, all political forces run for election to the Knesset, even the Islamic party, and Israel has a remarkable legal system at the top of which is a Supreme Court. Even if we could wish for more democracy, and even if we fear the threats that hang over this system, particularly from the not at all harmless populist radical right, the fact remains that Israeli democracy is an astounding achievement of Zionism.

But on the other hand, the reality is very far from the dream. Firstly, since the beginnings of the movement, a significant controversy has emerged as to the relationship of the future state with the Jewish religion. Zionism wanted people to gather in Israel, but these people had fundamentally different views on the role of religion in the state to be. On one hand, most of the Zionist founders dreamt of a modern, pluralist, secular, democratic state where religious practice was private and where politics and religion were separate, as established in France by the 1905 law. Religion would of course have a legitimate place, rabbis would continue to lead the service in the synagogues, but they would not interfere in the daily life of society and the State. But religious-Zionist Jews already had a completely different view: for them, the Jewish state would necessarily have to respect religious rules in a number of domains, or practicing Jews would not be able to be part of it. From their point of view the very nature of the mitzvot, the religious practices typical of the Jewish tradition, impose the non-separation of religion and state, particularly in the civil domain.

However, in his plans for a state that could accommodate and integrate “all” Jewish people, even before its creation, David Ben-Gurion had already made enormous concessions to the religious-Zionist population, and especially to the ultra-religious public who had strongly opposed Zionism.
Ben-Gurion accorded them that the civil state be ruled by rabbinical courts as prescribed by religious law, that systems of religious education continue to operate, that dietary laws be imposed in public institutions, that the Shabbat and other celebrations be public holidays in the state, and even that ultra-orthodox youth should not be forced into military service, thus initiating an appalling discrimination, etc. Instead of creating a “new Jew” and a state built on mutual tolerance and respect for the Other, Israel “fixed” certain behaviors and perpetuated divisions. Considering Israel’s political system and particularly its election method, and the fact that religious parties are indispensable for any government coalition, the status quo has taken root in the Israeli reality and has become worse. Instead of being a society of mutual religious tolerance, Israel has become for the most part a society of religious coercion, very far from the ideal of Zionist thinkers.

From the economic and social points of view, the Zionist initiative emphasized the figure of the founder, a physically healthy man, toiling the soil with his own hands and not exploiting others, supportive of his fellow countrymen and content with little. But let us not forget that this dream of an egalitarian socialism with a human face was very soon challenged by anti-socialist movements, whose ideal was very different: they wanted a Jewish state built on individual initiative, private enterprise, economic freedom, and capitalism, even if these movements (revisionists and liberals) were minorities. Since the fourth aliyah (1924), there have been immigrants that wanted to “develop” themselves in the city, in industry and trade, and who completely rejected the socialist utopia.

The founders’ dream was meaningful up to 1967, until the Six Days War. During the first twenty years of the state, the founding ideal was still very much present at all levels of Israeli society. The socialist and cooperative movement dominated politics and society, and the Kibbutz movement, based on the ideals of equality and solidarity, spread to all domains despite being representative of a small proportion of the population: army, economy, and culture. As the country was poor and the majority of people had very few resources, general austerity was the rule, and solidarity was almost a necessity. There is no need to “idealize” those first twenty years of the state, as some do; there were several dysfunctions. The power of Mapai (the Labor party) was overwhelming, Ben-Gurion’s autocracy was insufferable for many, the integration of Holocaust survivors was very
problematic, the contempt for Arab immigrants was staggering, etc. But it is true that, as a whole, Israel’s situation at the time was not too far from the founders’ ideal.

Today, remembering that original dream makes us smile. Israeli society is light-years from those heroic times. Why? First of all, let us be honest – just as the kibbutz could not remain isolated from its environment, the Jewish state could not remain isolated from the rest of the Western world, where similar processes have taken place. Capitalism and privatization have taken over everywhere; throughout the world we see the decline of traditional agriculture, the decrease of population working in the primary sector, and we can no longer base an economy on the return to the land or on cooperativism or egalitarianism, as the founders did. But we need to insist on the factors specific to Israel which accelerated this phenomenon.

Firstly, the military victory of 1967 opened up a new era in these countries. Factors such as the copious Palestinian workforce, the new territories, the enormous increase in the defense budget, a long period of quiet at the borders, major public works such as the building of the Bar-Lev line along the Suez Canal, a new wave of immigration from 1967 onwards, particularly from Western countries, the contribution of tourism, US support, and other factors triggered an incredible period of economic expansion, which widened the gap between the echelons of society. This expansion led to a widening of the gap between the various social categories and less mutual support in society. Israel has become a consumer society like the USA, more and more excessive, more and more privatized and liberalized – in a word, more and more capitalist. The victory of the Right at the 1977 elections, which brought Menachem Begin’s Likud to government, made official the death of Israeli socialism; and in fact the right has stayed in power ever since, with the exception of the short interludes of Rabin and Barak. In a word, Israeli society has devoted itself to a wild, merciless capitalism. The economic reforms inspired by Milton Friedman that Benjamin Netanyahu introduced while he was finance minister for Ariel Sharon completed this economic transformation. In 2011, Israel is the country where the gap between the wealthy and the poor is the largest of all Western countries, where the welfare state system is falling apart, and where a class of “millionaires” is developing next to a population which finds itself below the poverty line. This includes all kinds of people falling
through the cracks: traditional Sephardic people, developing towns, poorly integrated new Russian migrants, Ethiopians, ultra-orthodox people, Arab people, etc.

The gap between the ideal of the founders of Zionism and reality is even more striking as we consider the theme of the “conquest of labor” so central to the Zionist ideology – a theme that evoked class struggle against the masters, and the desire to build a society where there would be no exploitation of men by men. Or if we think of the “religion of labor” lauded by A. D. Gordon, who thought that individual work, and not the exploitation of the salaried, was an inherent moral value of Zionism.

To this socioeconomic situation, which I would qualify as disastrous, the supporters of the government’s social and economic policy retort that today the Jewish state, which was the main objective of Zionism, is a strong state from the military and economic point of view; that it has been accepted by the OECD and by other prestigious economic organizations; that it excels in the high-tech sector; and that all economic indicators are extremely positive. Not only is this optimistic and complacent analysis the prevalent view in Israel, more importantly, it has been largely adopted by socially and economically disadvantaged groups, whose vast majority votes for the parties that support this capitalist policy.

This is why the comparison between the Zionist ideal and its actual achievements calls for nuanced evaluations, far from triumphalism or denigration. On some levels, Zionism is an incredible success. The fact that barely three years after the end of the Holocaust a Jewish democratic state was established, that diaspora Jews have a refuge in case of anti-Semitic persecutions, and that Israeli culture shines brightly in the world is in itself extraordinary. But this positive evaluation cannot help but be tainted, whether we like it or not, with a certain bitterness and nostalgia.
Ilan Greilsammer