



Gavriel Cohen's Conversations with Isaiah Berlin: No. 9

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Gavriel Cohen: Conversation No. 9

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Selected topics

Talking to Chaim Weizmann

Talking Russian

New immigrants to Israel in the 1970s

Patricia Blake and Max Hayward

B. C. Gillinson

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Weizmann's politics and his views on immigrants

'There is no bridge between Washington and Pinsk'

Herzl and Ahad Ha'am

Ahad Ha'am's three major issues

IB's anticlericalism

IB's attitude to Hasidism

IB's unbelief (but acceptance of the religious urge)

The Pope

GC Now, I'll try to fill gaps that were left over from the last meeting.

Did you speak with Weizmann Russian?

IB No. Not much. I talked with his wife in Russian, but ...

GC Yes. That you told me.

IB And occasionally, of course, he would quote Russian remarks. No, I talked English. He used to repeat what Russians said to him before the war in Russian and so on, but his Russian was not very good .

GC [*laughter*] But let's say ...

IB Look. It's quite clear. I've told you before. He spoke every language with a Yiddish accent.

GC I know.

IB Every language.

GC I know. Nice voice with a Yiddish accent. Yes. Very nice voice.

IB And he only talked Russian to me when he wanted to talk in code on the telephone. When he talked about Stephen Wise, he said ‘the sage’ in Russian. Wise. That kind of thing.

GC I see. see. Now, had he known better Russian, I get the impression that when somebody knows Russian, you prefer to speak Russian.

IB I do. I like it, I enjoy it very much, and it’s so seldom, that if I can do it, I like doing it.

GC I even thought that some friendships you developed because of Russian.

IB It might be true, but I wonder if it is true.

GC By the way, Nabokov spoke Russian or English?

IB Absolutely, Russian. He spoke English perfectly.

GC And you spoke with him Russian.

IB Yes, for the most part. Sometimes English, of course, but Russian.

GC And then ...

IB Mainly Russian. But I would have made friends with Nabokov anyway, in any language.

GC All right I see.

IB But of course that was a factor. I’m trying to think who I would talk to in Russian, otherwise – I’m on particularly good terms with the wife [Larissa] of Francis Haskell in Oxford, and of course she’s a Soviet Russian. We talk Russian, and it irritates everybody else.

GC [*laughter*]

IB I used to talk to Lydia Keynes. Keynes's wife was a Russian ballerina.

GC Yes, I knew she was a ballerina.

IB She was Russian

GC I didn't know she was Russian.

IB Pure, yes. Lopokova was her name, and it used to annoy Keynes. It always annoys people when people speak some other language they can't understand.

GC Yes and ...

IB When Aline talks French, I don't understand a word – on the telephone. Well, more or less. I exaggerate. But on the whole, not. I don't listen.

GC And the Pasternak sisters?

IB Russian.

GC Of course. And Stravinsky?

IB In Russian. Except in company, but otherwise Russian. Certainly. And Stravinsky's wife, more particularly, Russian, certainly.

GC I remember once in Jerusalem I saw you speaking Russian with Shmuel Ettinger.

IB Certainly.

GC Which means you prefer ...

IB I like it.

GC You like it. That's what I ...

IB I like it. I enjoy it. I enjoy it because it's a language which is quite close to me, and I can say things in it which I cannot say in English.

GC That's what I wanted to ask.

IB It's true of all languages.

GC I think so.

IB Any language is a window through which – cuts reality differently from another language. Hebrew and English are not the same. What you say in Hebrew, you'll not say in English. The emphasis is different, the world is somewhat transformed.

GC Ah, you mean that you can say it in Russian but you can't say it in English, but not all the things – there are things you can say in English but you can't say in Russian, or not?

IB That's too simple. The world feels differently if you – between speaking one language and another. You cut the things differently. The shape of the universe about which you speak is transformed by the language which you apply to it.

GC But, except English, is Russian the language you feel freer than others?

IB Yes. Certainly, certainly. I don't really feel free in any [other?] foreign language.

GC That's what you told me.

IB I don't speak German or French or Italian or Hebrew at all. I can't conduct a conversation for any length of time. I'm really not gifted at languages. People think I must be, but I'm not. I'm not.

GC Now, did – it's in a way a personal question ...

IB Yes. By all means.

GC When the new Jewish immigrants came to Israel in the 1970s, in their masses, I was terribly disappointed.

IB Yes.

GC My mother came from Russia. All her friends were Russian, and the family. I had a certain ...

IB Image.

GC ... image in my mind. And they were so different.

IB Quite different. Exactly.

GC Of course, now we know because of two generations of Bolshevik regime, and everything. But it was shocking.

IB It was to everyone then.

GC Now, I was going to ask, you were also ...

IB I didn't meet many of them. I met one or two or three, but – and I talked to them. Yes, I wasn't shocked, because I expected it.

GC Yes. That's what I thought.

IB They were aggressive, they were very reactionary.

GC Very much.

IB They were right-wing, very materialistic, and they couldn't – yes.

GC Exactly the opposite style of the Russians we were used to.

IB Oh, of course. The whole idea of Russian Jews was that these were decent liberal Jews who were oppressed by the Soviet regime, wanted a country in which they could have decent democracy and a quiet life. Not at all. They all voted for Begin as one man, because they weren't ...

GC Not any more.

IB No, not any more. Oh no. The word 'democracy', the word 'socialism' was a dirty word.

GC Yes. And they were in a way neurotics, because they were not used to making decisions. I mean in Russia you don't make decisions.

IB Wait a moment. All those jokes were made in Russia about a tailor who makes a suit, expected the state to take it from his hands. The idea of having to wait for the customer was unheard of. I mean, they didn't know how to react.

GC And we didn't expect that to be a real psychological problem for them – to come to a country where you have to decide a hundred decisions a day . What kind of bread to buy. And that made them ...

IB It's very funny that the Israeli Embassy didn't tell you. They could have known.

GC They could have.

IB It shows great insensitivity on their part.

GC Maybe the people who dealt with it, they knew, but I didn't.

IB Nor did they.

GC I mean, a man like Binyamin Eliav.

IB Nobody warned you.

GC You know.

IB What?

GC That we were not warned?

IB No. Clearly not. Nobody ever stated it. When they met Jews in Russia, they talked to them about Jewish problems, about anti-Semitism, about the synagogue, about Israel, and they didn't talk about daily lives.

GC Very interesting. And you told me that you only met a few. Is it because you didn't take interest in it, or accidental?

IB No, purely accidental.

GC Are you sure?

IB Quite sure. I was not

GC ... because they are not nice.

IB I was not repelled I mean, after all, I had two elderly relations who came out of Russia.

GC That's another story.

IB They were rather old. They were exactly what I expected.

GC Yes. All right, that's your relations.

IB They were shaped by old-fashioned Jewish life.

GC Yes.

IB In Russia.

GC But that's the point; but are you sure that you didn't have some inhibitions?

IB No. None at all. If I met them, I would talk to them. I didn't know what I was – no, none. I was never thrown into sufficient contact with the Jews from Russia to be able to form that kind of negative opinion.

GC You see, I remember ...

IB I know it's true, because people said that to me. I didn't come across it.

GC I remember once in Santa Margherita, in the beach, we were there, you and me and Aline, and I think Herbert, and there was there a young lady having a bath. I think she came from Milano or something, and it turned out to be that she was just out of Vilna or Riga or something, and I saw that you were not intrigued.

IB No.

GC It was 1970.

IB No. I would have been, but I'm too shy. I can't enter into conversation with strangers. I wouldn't have minded at all.

GC Yes, I see, but – you wouldn't have minded, but you were not taken by her, you were not ...

IB I know what to expect.

GC Yes.

IB I know what they are like. I have a very clear idea of what they are like, I don't feel in the least unsympathetic, but I don't feel deeply sympathetic either. I mean, it's ...

GC I saw it, and I understand it.

IB No more than American Jews or any other Jews. Jews are Jews, and of course I'm drawn to them, but it doesn't excite me to meet someone who was in Riga five years ago.

GC That's the point.

IB Because they are perfectly normal. They happen to have these particular qualities of not being able to decide, and having rather

right-wing views, and this ... Otherwise, they are exactly like what I expect.

GC They are so materialistic.

IB I know.

GC Really, it's ... Many are rather intelligent, but – yes, all right. Now, you said that – by the way, did you speak Russian with Edmund Wilson?

IB But when I talk to Brodsky, for example, I feel absolutely no ...

GC All right.

IB But still, he was born there.

GC Yes, all right, but ...

IB Quite late.

GC In the [?].

IB Yes.

GC Did you speak Russian with Edmund Wilson?

IB No. He used various Russian expressions and so on. But certainly not.

GC Did you speak Russian with Max Hayward?

IB Well, only as a kind of joke. But not regularly, not normally. No. I did not. I talked Russian with Katkov. Normally. I talked in Russian to Katkov, I talked in Russian to a lady called Niouta Kallina, who is the founder of the Third Programme. She was a Moscow Jewess.

GC Niouta.

IB Niouta was her name. Kallina was her name.

GC Some friends of my mother ...

IB [She?] was called Niouta. Aniouta. It comes from Anna. Anna was her name. She was a straight [?] Russian Jewess. Lived in Berlin, then in England. A high-grade intellectual, who created the ...

GC The Third Programme?

IB Yes. The talks.

GC Really?

IB Not the music, but the talks. Absolutely.

GC And the music was Hans Keller.

IB The music was Hans Keller, yes. She produced the talks, she trained Toynbee when he had to deliver the Reith Lectures. She was a great expert. I talked to her in Russian.

GC I don't know whether I told you, but I think that the best breed of modern Jews are Russians who were educated in Germany.

IB It always was so. The Russians of the nineteenth century were some of the most civilised people in the world. And some of the Jews have taken on that colour, too.

GC And then add to it the German education.

IB Something abroad, but Nabokov, who left Russia at the age of eighteen, nineteen, went to Berlin first, and then to Paris. Hence he was all right.

GC And there were many ...

IB Vladimir Nabokov, the novelist, his first cousin, the same thing.

GC And among the Jewish leaders, Motzkin ...

IB Max Hayward was much more like a Soviet citizen than he was like an Englishman in some ways.

GC I know.

IB More at home among those sort of people.

GC Yes. When I read Patricia Blake's – did you read Patricia Blake's introduction to [Max Hayward, *Writers in Russia: 1917–1978* (London, 1983)]?¹

IB Oh certainly. And I was deeply offended; [I made] a violent protest.

GC Why?

IB Because she misrepresented me in a very horrifying way.

GC I don't remember.

IB Two or three passages which are totally full, which Max Hayward must have communicated to her. He was an awful liar, Max Hayward. He wasn't truthful.

GC [*unclear*]

IB Well, I'll tell you. Well, why should I repeat them now? I'm trying to remember. Wait a minute. One was about – I remember one about Katkov in particular, and there was one about Max Hayward himself. Yes. That he came to dinner with me in New College, in New College at the High Table, and I talked to David Cecil. Who was there else, was there somebody else? And he alleged that the two of us, [?] that it was simply terrible to hear all this patter by all these so-called civilised people, all this trivial talk between all these snobbish characters, nothing [?] very obvious, and so on. He probably did say it, but it wasn't terribly necessary to be reported. That point, the thing which I objected to was, for example, when –

¹ See A 219–19.

because he was very nice to me, Max Hayward, in the last days, and kept on begging me to come to his deathside, yes.

GC I know that, and [you?] brought ...

IB And brought him presents, and so on. I know. No, he was very respectful. He had some respect for me. This is what he must have said to Patricia Blake at some point. She's a nasty girl.

GC [?]

IB Yes. She was Nabokov's third wife.

GC Was she?

IB Yes. That's how I met her. [*telephone rings*] Forgive me. [*tape is turned off and on again*] Yes. I was telling you about the second thing which I minded. And that is, that Katkov reported to Mrs Blake, Miss Blake, that when I brought *Zhivago* with me from Moscow, and he said that it must be translated immediately, I said, 'No. It doesn't matter whether it's translated now or translated later, it doesn't make any difference. Nobody will read it in that degree of a hurry. There's absolutely no need to fuss about that. Either – to get it published either in Russian or in English.' That's a total lie. I mean, the whole idea of bringing it up was that it should be looked after, so to speak, not necessarily published, because that might do him harm. But in fact, I knew it was being published in Italy, so all this business about what did it matter – this year or next year is what he said I said – I then telephoned him and said, 'Did you hear me say that?' He said 'I'm very old, very feeble, and maybe I did, maybe, but I didn't say that you – maybe not. Oh, I don't think you did, no, oh, I may have told her that, yes. And maybe, maybe ...'. He was very angry with me because I said that to broadcast *Zhivago* over the Russian Service, they would use it as propaganda, that would do Pasternak harm. I may have been wrong, but I thought it was very very bad. Very bad to exploit [*coughing*]. So we had a certain disagreement. But anyway, she put all that in, and made me look in a very bad light. In all kinds of ways.

GC I don't remember [?].

IB Yes, well, look at it again. Maybe you'll find it. You see, I remember that introduction extremely well. He did have an affair with her, certainly.

GC Who?

IB Max.

GC With Patricia? [?]

IB Patricia, yes. Certainly. Oh, and lots of other people, but particularly with her. He had much nicer mistresses, whom I knew.

GC [*unclear*] You mean she's not nice?

IB Not at all. She's a tough journalist of a ruthless, self-... – pushy kind. Everything she does is calculated. There's no spontaneity in her behaviour.

GC I see. By the way, Max's attachment to Jews and Judaism was incredible.

IB Extraordinary.

GC I know he knew many Jews.

IB No, but all the same. Partly Israel more than Jews.

GC Yes.

IB Partly because Israel was anti-Soviet. Let me tell you, it's not irrelevant. I don't think he had many friendships among Jews as such.

GC You mean Max?

IB Yes.

GC But in New York he did.

IB Because of his – in New York he only met people on the anti-Soviet front.

GC [*unclear*] Only, I don't think any others.

IB Only anti-Soviet Jews. I mean, people who had some relation to Russia. What other Jews can you produce, whom he might ...?

GC I don't know, but it doesn't look like that is the only motive.

IB In a way, though, that – no, it's not the only motive, but they felt quite – but people liked him, you see. The sort of people who liked him are Jews, people who took an interest in his field, in his attitude.

GC Yes. I see what you mean. And in Leeds he had Jewish friends. In his youth. I remember.

IB That could be.

GC [*unclear*] or possibly when I came for my sabbatical in 1973, he had one Saturday a guest from Leeds, and he invited Batya and myself, and George Katkov, and it was a certain [B. C.] Gillinson from Leeds.

IB I knew Gillinson.

GC Gillinson is a very active Jew in Leeds.

IB Gillinson was the head of the community.

GC And he came to see Max.

IB He was the head of the Jewish community, and he took an interest in the University. He was a Zionist, all that. I once delivered a lecture, in Leeds, under his auspices. I remember Gillinson. Yes, he came to see Max.

GC That means probably he had some other ties. Patricia Black was a Jewess.

IB Of course. Her real name must be Schwartz. Blake, she was called.

GC Yes. It was Schwartz. She said Black, and they wrote Blake. She writes it Blake.

IB Blake.

GC I heard the story about her, but that is of ...

IB ... no interest. She works for *Time* magazine. Very properly [?]. Very anti-Israel paper, it is.

GC I don't read it.

IB Nor do I, but *Time* magazine.

GC By the way, I heard on the radio that since the riots started in Israel, ten weeks [?]² ago, the *New Statesman* didn't mention it.

IB How extraordinary. Very odd.

GC Isn't it?

IB Surprising and disturbing.

GC They never mentioned it.

IB There's a woman who always writes about Israel for them. What is her name? Naomi Shepherd.

GC If they want a report, they would ask her for it.

IB Quite.

GC And *The Economist* wrote in a very ...

² The First Intifada began on 9 December 1987, exactly ten weeks before the present conversation took place.

IB ... friendly way. I know.

GC Very disappointing.

IB Yes. Neo...

GC Very anti-...

IB Well, *The Times* is a – the leading articles are straightforwardly pro-Israel.

GC Except the *Independent*, I think that most dailies are ...

IB – more pro-Israel than one would think. They should be.

GC *The Guardian*, the best reports are [in?] *The Guardian*.

IB But *The Guardian* is very anti-Israel.

GC Yes, but the reports are very [accurate?].

IB By whom, by whom?

GC By Ian Black, who knows Arabic, who knows Hebrew.

IB Well, I'm very glad to hear it.

GC He is the best person.

IB But their leading articles are probably critical.

GC Yes. That I didn't say [?], but the coverage is excellent.

*

Now, you said that Weizmann would be left of centre, or was left of centre.

IB Yes.

GC I think that your interpretation is a little bit ...

IB Wrong?

GC I'll tell you what I think. He liked Hashomer Hatzair [Zionist youth movement]. He liked Nahalal [an agricultural settlement], who were Hapoel Hatzair [pacifist Zionist group], because they were not activists, democrats, but Hapoel Hatzair would be – they were the least Socialist among the socialists. And he liked them, which means his attachment to Hashomer Hatzair or Hapoel Hatzair was because of their moderate way in Zionism.

IB Well, yes, of course.

GC And constructive way.

IB Yes.. All right.

GC Secondly, in the 1930s, he developed the Labour party as his ally.

IB Quite.

GC After 1931 there are some moving letters, to Ben-Gurion, Berl Katznelson, and I think Sprinzak. 'Our alliance was for me the Rock of Gibraltar.'

IB Very good.

GC He repeats it and repeats it.

IB Yes.

GC And they were allies in developing the concept of parity, to avoid [a/the?] legislative council.

IB Yes, quite.

GC And not to be able to prevent the idea of a Jewish state.

IB Wait a second. You're talking about political issues. That is not what I mean.

GC One second. I think he became against Ben-Gurion ...

IB For obvious reasons.

GC When he was [?].

IB Entirely.

GC But his ideas were not ...

IB You're talking in terms of political opinions. That is not what I mean when I say left of centre.

GC So what do you mean?

IB What I mean is something quite different. Temperamentally, Weizmann was a man who liked the Jewish people, as such. What he didn't like was the superior groups of Western Jews who saw themselves as an elite of any kind. He really didn't like them at all. I mean, he used them and he flattered them and he got money out of them, and he got professors to come to Israel from them, but he didn't like them as – what he liked was what he was brought up among, as we all do. He liked the mass[es]. The Jewish masses meant something to him, and the Jewish masses meant the great Yiddish-speaking masses of Eastern Europe. That's who Israel was meant to be for. He didn't much care whether German Jews came or not, unless, of course it would help, because they were experts and important for the development of Israel. But if no German Jews came as German Jews, this wouldn't hurt [?] anything. The idea was the immigration of warm-hearted, pop... – populism is what I mean. And he felt best among these kind of people, to whom in the end he could talk Yiddish. That's what I mean.

GC Yes. That I can see.

IB But Brandeis was exactly what he didn't like. Quite apart from the difference of views, exa... – he made that famous remark: 'Evidently there is no bridge between Pinsk and Washington'³ is what he said. The bridge was not just a tactical bridge, or a bridge as far as ideas about how to develop Israel. The bridge was personal, emotional; the outlooks were different. And when he thought of Israel as a country for Jews, the kind of Jews he meant were the healthily brought up children of the kind of Russian Jews he knew.

GC Ah.

IB Even Jabotinsky was preferable to Brandeis.

GC That I'm sure. If you say East European Jews, I agree. And even the Jew of Poland. All right.

IB Oh yes.

GC But I don't think he was a populist, because I – and here we come to the difference between him and Jabotinsky. He, because of his political attitude towards the way of building the Yishuv, wanted halutzim.⁴

IB Yes, he did.

GC And not the masses.

IB No, but ...

GC Halutzim were already a sort of elitist attitude of a different type.

IB No.

GC He didn't say ...

³ 'There is no bridge between Washington and Pinsk.' Maurice Samuel (ed.), *Report of the Proceedings of the 24th Annual Convention of the Zionist Organization of America* (New York, August 1921: Zionist Organization of America), Sixth Session, Hotel Cleveland, Cleveland, 7 June 1921, 145.

⁴ 'Jewish pioneers entering Palestine in order to build up their future national home.' *OED*.

IB He may have said it, but the halutzim are members of the masses.

GC Isaiah, [?].

IB Socially.

GC Yes. Socially they were members.

IB That's all I mean!

GC Because in the beginning of the 1930s, when he had – there were good years of mass immigration. He said, 'I don't want the scum of the earth of East Europe to come.'

IB No. Of course not. No. Terrible phrase. He didn't want the Mecklers [brokers/middlemen].

GC And the Mecklers ...

IB He didn't want any ...

GC And he never never appealed to them demagogically. That Jabotinsky did.

IB No, that obviously had to [?], I know. He had an image of idealistic young Zionists with gifted – who would become scientists, who would become developers.

GC They would be the bridgehead to the masses. OK.

IB Yes.

GC All right.

IB The people they sprang from – he did not mind balabatim [householders]. What he did mind was what he regarded as a corrupt mass of commercial Jews, who had no basis to them, or crooks and operators and managers [?] of this and managers of that, with whom he had nothing in common. That's what I mean.

GC From his point of view.

IB What he did not want was cultivated elites. Because that wouldn't have built the country for him. That is not what immigrants were made of. His image of Israel was what Russia might have become without the Revolution, without Lenin, the kind of democracy of people with Russian Jewish feelings.

GC But he never joined a labour movement or the Labour Party.

IB He joined no movement, because he hated political parties.

GC But he had ...

IB No. He joined no movement.

GC His political basis was the General Zionists.

IB He had no politics.

GC I know, but ...

IB Never mind; the basis was pragmatic. Whatever worked, from his point of view.

GC This was his mistake.

IB Maybe, but he was ...

GC But in the 1930s, he lost his grip [?], and he lost his touch with the General Zionists.

IB He had no political views. He did not have political views. Political programmes meant nothing to him. That's the point. Just as intellectual issues meant nothing to him.

GC That's in the period you knew him.

IB Of course.

GC I think earlier ...

IB Earlier he might have been against ...

GC Earlier he was. He was political-minded.

IB No, but he didn't think in terms of political programmes. He thought in terms of the structure of the country – all he wanted really was what Herzl wanted, what all these people wanted, which was a sort of European-style democracy.

GC And yet he conceptualised the alternative to Herzl on the one hand and to Ahad Ha'am on the other. I mean the concept of constructive or practical Zionism.

IB Yes.

GC I mean integrated Zionism as against the political Zionism of Herzl.

IB Yes.

GC Or spiritual Zionism of Ahad Ha'am.

IB No, that's too simple.

GC The [?] of Weizmann.

IB That's too simple, what you are saying. Simplifies Herzl too much. He was against – the political concept of Herzl was simply a question of means. How we get the country. So it's only a question of method, not a question of some kind of political ideal. Herzl's political ideal was a French Third Republic.

GC Now I see what you mean.

IB Roughly. He just wanted an ordinary civilised Western State. Herzl wasn't what people like Schorske and Trevor-Roper maintain. There wasn't an element of hysterical nationalism or semi-Fascism. That's not true. He wanted something like the Third Republic.

England, France. That's what all bourgeois Jews admired Holland. [telephone: tape turned off and on again] He liked Ahad Ha'am, and Ahad Ha'am liked him. And Ahad Ha'am crowned him, as you know. Told him to become head of the movement, over the head of all the important people, like Sokolov, [Yehiel] Chelnov and so on. But they got on. But he thought Ahad Ha'am's idea was not the state at all, but some kind of spiritual centre, and that meant nothing to him. And rightly not. There's nothing in it.

GC Discussing Ahad Ha'am, I believe, and if you read Weizmann carefully, that he admired Ahad Ha'am to the last day.

IB That's right

GC And that psychologically he served as a disciple who ought to rebel; and I can tell you even more than that. I believe that the majority of the Zionist leaders of Weizmann's generation, all of whom in a way rebelled against Ahad Ha'am, went on until the last day of their life arguing with him in their hearts.

IB No, I understand that.

GC You see what I mean.

IB No, Ahad Ha'am had a very powerful influence.

GC He had power.

IB Because he was the best Jewish thinker of their time, of course.

GC And he raised issues that were right *à la longue*.

IB Yes, and painful, too.

GC Painful.

IB Oh yes.

GC Three major issues.

IB The Arabs.

GC That we tried to hide.

IB The Arabs was no. 1.

GC The relations between Israel and the Diaspora.

IB Yes.

GC And the place of religion in Israel.

IB Quite so – all of which were central.

GC All of the major issues.

IB What Weizmann liked about Ahad Ha'am, apart from respecting him personally as a man of integrity and vision, was that Ahad Ha'am wanted the Jewish people to live a Jewish life, without oppression by their Rabbis. [?] Without rabbinical – without theocracy. And that Weizmann believed in. Because Weizmann wanted to be a Jew among Jews.

GC The ...

IB He did not want assimilation. Apart from the political need for a state, he didn't like assimilation as such.

GC Oh, yes.

IB And that's what – Ahad Ha'am was the only non-rabbinical intellectual alternative to assimilation. Namier, who was so close to Weizmann, was entirely pro-assimilation. But he wanted a Jewish state, in which a lot of assimilated Jews would create a splendid Jewish state. But they were all – they would have to get rid of all this rabbinical nonsense.

GC Yes.

IB Jewish tradition meant nothing to him. What he wanted was a state, because he wanted to cease being ashamed of being a Jew. He wanted to be proud, and stand up and have a proper political life, like anybody else, like other nations. Normality, normalisation.

GC In the beginning of the nineteenth century, like Masaryk and the other ...

IB That's right. Normalisation.

GC Masaryk was what he wanted.

IB Yes, he [Ahad Ha'am] thought Sokolov was like Masaryk , and quite admired him, in spite of Weizmann's objections. But fundamentally what Sokolov wanted was exactly what Weizmann wanted.

GC Oh yes.

IB Personally there was a ...

GC Yes

IB Their [Weizmann's and Sokolov's] ideas were the same.

GC Why not? [?]

IB Chelnov the same. The Russian Zionists had on the whole – there was solidarity. The only difference was tactics.

GC Yes.

IB Their ideas were – [Beba] Idelson, the brothers Goldberg, it was all exactly the same.

GC And Weizmann.

IB The same thing.

GC Later.

IB The same thing.

GC Yes. Oh, they were all along.

IB And even poor old [?] Nahum [Goldmann?], who had something of that in him.

GC Nahum did.

IB Yes.

GC Yes. Oh yes.

IB Just that. He just wanted to be a Jew.

GC That's for sure.

IB They all wanted to be Jews. Namier did not want to be a Jew. That's another matter.

GC Yes.

IB Naturally [?] wanted a glorification of an independent Jewish state.

GC He could well have become President, Mark[?] Namier.

IB He could, but he wouldn't.

GC [*unclear*]

IB He wouldn't because he's – they couldn't, because it was thought that wasn't practical.

GC Al right.

IB He was too English for that.

GC That's another ...

IB He believed in English methods.

GC That's the only thing. Otherwise there was in Jabotinsky ...

IB Absolutely. Some common element.

GC This kind of [?].

IB Certainly. Officer and a gentleman.

GC The impact of Italy on Jabotinsky.

IB Namier didn't want officers, but he wanted gentleman. He wasn't one himself, but he admired them.

GC Yes. Now, speaking about Ahad Ha'am. British Zionists were taken by Ahad Ha'am. Leon Simon, Bentwich, this generation. Were you taken by him, I mean did you read Ahad Ha'am?

IB No. I didn't read Hebrew very well, and I didn't – because I read Bentwich's – I had no great respect for Ahad Ha'am.

GC I thought so [?].

IB That's the trouble, yes, because I thought that all the stuff about Moses and Spencer and God knows what seemed to me stale nineteenth-century sociology. I respected him as a figure because he was steeped in Jewish values, he was a man brought up brave, morally courageous, penetrating about Jewish issues, but the philosophy of Ahad Ha'am was for me not a philosophy.

GC For Zionist intellectuals who were not educated in philosophy, he was ...

IB I know, [what] Joseph [sc. Tomáš?] Masaryk was for the Czechs.

GC [*unclear*]

IB Exactly, wonderful. For me it was second-rate, decent, liberal platitudes.

GC [*unclear*]

IB Plus psychologism. A little bit of influence by religious modernism. People who said it didn't matter whether Christ lived or not, the important thing is the myth of Christ; Moses, it doesn't matter whether he lived. For us he must exist.

GC It was before Freud, so ...

IB It was before Freud.

GC Who could it be?

IB Spencer.

GC Certain[ly?].

IB Which nobody read.

GC But he did.

IB Certainly.

GC I know.

IB Without doubt. He's Spencer, probably Court [?], Spencer, all ...

GC He read Spencer for sure.

IB I know he did [?], and he probably read, I don't know, who would have been the – somebody whom the intellectuals, the Russian intelligentsia read in those days. Mill, Spencer, maybe Carlyle.

GC He read English well.

IB I know. Maybe Carlyle, Emerson, whom Bialik read, those sort of people. Just decent, liberal writers.

GC I see.

IB But I agree, for the Jewish non-philosophers this was a kind of Westernism that excited them.

GC As a young boy in high school, I admired Ahad Ha'am.

IB I understand that very well.

GC But then, later, much deeper Jewish thinkers, like Nachman Krochmal, Berdyczewski: they were much deeper.

IB Probably . Ahad Ha'am was a very admirable figure.

GC Ahad Ha'am?

IB Yes. That is the point. He was sitting in England, an agent of some tea company, Wissotzky. And he dedicated himself to saving the Jews. He had a vision of what he wanted the Jews to be, which the others did not. And what he wanted them to be was not so bad. He thought that the only culture they had was their religious culture. This is correct. It is the only culture they have. At the same time, he did not want theocracy and despotism of the Rabbis.

GC To pave an ideological way between theocracy ...

IB And assimilation.

GC [?] were not that easy.

IB No, he did manage it. Secular religious culture.

GC When did your anticlericalism start?

IB I don't think it ever started. I don't think I was ever particularly anticlerical.

GC I know.

IB I'm only anticlerical – oh, what do you mean, 'anticlerical'? You mean as far as the Jews are concerned, or in general?

GC You never liked the Jewish religious parties.

IB No.

GC The Zionist religious parties.

IB No. Simply because I wasn't religious. That's all. I didn't like the Aguda [Agudas Israel] because it was the Aguda, because they were not Zionist and because they were fanatical. I was repelled by the fanaticism of my generation, my grandparents, in Riga. It was this absolutely rigid, particularly my grandfather, my mother's father, who didn't allow her to play the piano, because it was forbidden in a woman [?], the same thing, yes. Exactly. And this extreme fanaticism, I was repelled by that and bored by it. I was bored by the synagogue. I did not enjoy going to the synagogue. I didn't mind it too much, but I was terribly bored. Their prayers were too long; ordinary bourgeois childish reactions is what I had. And the idea of religious Zionism didn't please me, because I had no respect for Rabbis. I had never in my life met a Rabbi whom I could deeply respect as a human being. Never. I liked some and didn't like others [*tape turned off and on again*], to whom I could look up as a person. Anyone.

GC And you remember it as a reminiscence of a child?

IB No. I'm telling you that now. It wasn't conscious. I was never asked that question. But I never wanted to meet a Rabbi as such. When I met them I was polite, but no Rabbi I ever met seemed to me either intellectually or morally first-rate. It's a sad comment. No doubt ha-Rav Cook was, but I didn't know him. I liked ha-Rav Herzog, such a nice man. And I was pleased to meet him, and so on.

GC And you never – you have never gone through a religious phase?

IB Well, yes, I must have done. I did, yes. Not a very deep one. I think some time, when I was about sixteen – it is the kind of time

when that happens. Leonard Schapiro and I used to go to shtetls in London, instead of the official Anglo-Jewish affair[?], because we thought the fervour was more genuine. And there was some kind of deep passionate feeling on the part of these poor Jews. And that made a deep impression on me, and I preferred that to the boring Anglican services of the United Synagogue. So I had a phase of that kind, but even then I didn't believe in God. I must have prayed in my life, because in moments of crisis I was of course apt to pray, but I wasn't praying for any particular – I could never in my life understand what the word 'God' meant. That's my trouble. Either it's a man with a long white beard – that I understand, but that I don't believe. Or I don't know what they mean. The idea of some kind of impersonal spirit who guides the universe, and dictates the Ten Commandments of Moses, is meaningless to me, and always has been. So I've never been through a deeply religious phase, and yet I've never quarrelled against it. I've never had either for or against. Religion has never disgusted me. I don't mind going to churches, I don't mind going to mosques.

GC No.

IB I quite enjoy it. I go to synagogues now with more pleasure than I did when I was a child, because I like the sense of historical Jewish solidarity. But that's all. And the prayers are known to me, and they have a certain sentimental value. But I don't believe a word.

GC Now, in the history of ideas, you never dealt with religious ideas.

IB No, but I respected them. When Hamann and Vico and all these characters, who do deal with religious ideas – I felt what they said was absolutely true, that it is a basic element in society, to want to worship, and to have a religion. That there is no such thing as a non-religious society. That cannot be. I felt psychologically the need for some kind of a religious experience. It was as basic as the need for artistic experience. For food and drink and shelter and belonging to a group. And therefore I have always accepted it as a perfectly natural human need, which needed to be satisfied. All I objected to was the political disasters that followed from it, or moral bullying. But I've never felt that an atheist society would be intellectually or morally better. We'll never know that [?]. That's why I have no

disgust. That's why I don't spit when rabbis are mentioned, as Namier did before his reconversion. Namier really hated priests and rabbis. I never did. I didn't like the Orthodox Church. The Russian priests, no, because that smelled of pogroms to me. I knew that when they had their formal processions, long essenced locks, and the icons, and the long thing, sometimes it ended in beating up the Jews. So I had a certain atavistic fear, and not so much fear, but distaste. So when I see Russian – even now, may not even be bishops – when I see Russian bishops, with long essenced locks, and holy looks, I have a certain reaction. They are the only – I have no objection to mullahs.

GC Because you have no association ...

IB I have no association to – none to Jesuits, none to Catholic priests. I don't mind them.

GC You don't mind Jesuits?

IB No.

GC Even the Inquisition, and this part of history?

IB No. Not part of my history. The Inquisition happened somewhere else. What happened – pogroms in Russia is part of my past. The Inquisition was long ago. Of course I'm against ...

GC Yes, I'm sure.

IB And I claim the French eighteenth century and Enlightenment – well this is abstract, to some extent. When I see a Catholic priest now, I don't feel he wants to burn Jews, because none of them do, the ones that I meet. Of course there are fanatics ...

GC I think in the late 1960s.

IB The Pope is not a pleasing figure to me. He's not a ... [*telephone rings*]. Now, we were talking about Ahad Ha'am at that moment. No, he was a positive figure in Jewish life, but his ideas were obviously not realised. That is clear.

GC We are talking about ...

IB The Popes, to Catholics.

GC And religion.

IB Religion, yes. I must say, the thoughts of the last Pope's – of course, John the 23rd was all right, and I don't even hate the present Pope, in spite of his somewhat reactionary views, and I'm sure he's got an element of anti-Semitism in him. Like all Poles, he must have. But when one thinks of all those thin-faced Popes who preceded him, I get a sort of feeling that ...

GC There is something [*unclear*].

IB Not good for Jews, the Pope. The Vatican is not – although Lord Weidenfeld is trying to promote Catholic–Jewish relations, I'm not against it, but I have no hope from that quarter.

GC He's an interesting Pope.

IB Certainly.

GC More than in his [*technique*].

IB Absolutely. Very, exactly. Very handsome, very effective. One of the most powerful people in the world. He's restored the papacy to a much higher level than it was before. That's why they were very wise to choose him. From their point of view. Kind of Catholic Weizmann.

GC Pardon?

IB He's a kind of Catholic Weizmann.

GC [*laughter*] But I'm coming back to your attitude towards clericalism on the one hand, in Jewish life, and another problem, on the other. In the late 1960s and the early 1970s you became worried

about two different aspects in Jewish life. Then you became anti-clerical; I mean, I would get letters from you ...

IB Quite, about the...

GC [What should be?] done about it, and you organised something, and that on and so forth.

IB Yes.

GC Secondly, simultaneously more or less, you became occupied with the problem of the apologetic attitude to Jewish history.

IB On whose part?

GC I mean the general – I mean the history that is being written by Jewish scholars is too apologetic.

IB Of whom?

GC And nothing is being done about it.

IB By whom, for example? I can't remember. I'm sure I was, I'm sure I'm anti-apologetic, but I'm sure. It's plausible. I just wonder who are you thinking of?

GC I don't ...

IB Cecil Roth?

GC Not only, but I remember you wrote me, 'Could we find somebody who would write a different kind of Jewish history?'

IB Yes, quite so. Exactly. Yes.

GC And it started in the late 1960s, and I don't know against what background.

IB Nor do I.

GC You don't remember?

IB No, I don't. All I can tell you is I rem... – About the Rabbonim I do remember, because they're, of course, more and more – they became influential in Israel. And I thought this is a grave danger to individual liberties.