'Zohan' and the Quest for Jewish Utopia

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One would have to be an incorrigible curmudgeon to dislike Adam Sandler's blockbuster comedy *You Don't Mess with the Zohan*—that, or an inveterate Zionist. Salon.com's Stephanie Zacharek praised the movie's effort to parse the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and "to bridge a gap that most of us, dispiritingly, have come to believe is unbridgeable."[1] Alex Dorn of Ugo.com claimed that "I laughed til tears came out of my eyes,"[2] and Wesley Morris of the *Boston Globe* admitted that "nothing has brought me more cheap pleasure at a movie this year."[3] Most unexpectedly, *Zohan* also garnered kudos from the Israeli media. Israeli TV's Channel 2 called it "the most Israeli movie ever produced in America," and the Hebrew website Achbar Ha'ir Online wrote that "the movie's depiction of Israeliness has been received with open arms by the Ministry of Information."[4] *Jerusalem Post* columnist Sam Friedman called it "the first… American movie to portray everyday Israel,"[5] and the paper's editor, David Horovitz, deemed it "the most overtly pro-Israel movie to come out of Hollywood since *Exodus*."[6]

What then, besides an aversion to hummus—used alternately in the film as toothpaste, cat food, and sexual lubricant—could anyone find objectionable in Sandler's burlesque about an Israeli commando who fakes his own death in order to start a career as a New York hairdresser? Certainly not the image of Israel it conveys, not so much a country as a nonstop beach party, teeming with caramelized vixens and hot-blooded adolescents. Zohan himself is a paragon of the macho Israeli, who feels no need to apologize for his use of physical force in the service of his cause. Undoubtedly, *Zohan* departs radically from the stereotypical cinematic image of an Israel steeped in terror and defended by ambivalent Jews devoured by self-doubt. And yet, more than any other movie—indeed, perhaps more than any other work of popular entertainment, and certainly one produced by Jews—*Zohan* repudiates the Zionist idea.

"I love my country," Zohan says early in the film, "but the fighting, it never ends." He later reiterates this thought, lamenting, "I couldn't take all the fighting anymore. What's it all for?" and "I've done so much for this country. When does it end?" The salve for Zohan's angst, we soon learn, is simple: leave Israel, move to Brooklyn, and marry a Palestinian.

To be sure, disgruntled Israeli agents and soldiers are hardly rare in recent films. Both the character of Avner in *Munich* (2006), written by Tony Kushner and directed by Steven Spielberg, and of Eyal in *Walk on Water* (2004), Israel's highest grossing film ever, are Mossad operatives who despair of the cyclical violence in their country and seek a way out. But while Eyal remains in Israel, Avner immigrates to Brooklyn—just like Zohan.

The decisions of Eyal on the one hand, and of Avner and Zohan on the other, represent far more than dramatic devices. *Walk on Water* was directed by an Israeli, Eytan Fox, while the other two films are products of American Jews. The choices made by their protagonists thus, to a great extent, reflect the gulf between Israeli and American Jewry over which community best guarantees Jewish survival—physical as well as spiritual—in a precarious,

secular age. Which polity, these misleadingly superficial films ask, constitutes the sole Jewish utopia, the State of Israel or the United States? Which is the real Promised Land?

Such questions, of course, are as old as Zionism itself. The first to point out the incompatibility of the American and Zionist visions was Emma Lazarus, the New York Jewish poet who penned the words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," and who became one of America's first Zionist activists. Appalled by the mass slaughter of Russian Jews during the 1882 pogroms, Lazarus exhorted her coreligionists to "recall the glorious Maccabean rage," and "wake, Israel, wake," by reestablishing Jewish statehood in Palestine. This "home for the homeless" and "nation for the denationalized" would, she believed, restore Jewish honor in the world and protect the Jews from further depredations. It would also enrich humanity with its cultural and scientific accomplishments and serve as an East-West nexus. "The world will gain as Israel gains," Lazarus wrote.[7]

In calling for the renewal of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel, Lazarus was evoking an age-old Jewish urge. Yet rather than rallying to the poet's cause, the American Jewish leadership almost universally reviled it. "[We] expect therefore neither a return to Palestine nor a restoration of… the Jewish state," announced the Union of Reform Congregations in 1885,[8] while Conservative Jewish scholar Abram S. Isaacs assailed Lazarus for advocating "a separate nationality… at a time when antisemites are creating the impression that Jews… are only Palestinians, Semites, [and] Orientals."[9] Orthodox rabbis, too, rejected Lazarus's attempt to end the Jews' divinely instituted exile, accusing her of arrogating God's exclusive prerogative. Indeed, except for some radical students at Columbia and Harvard, Zionism attracted negligible numbers of nineteenth-century American Jews.

The reluctance of American Jews to contemplate returning to Zion was all the more inexplicable in view of the fact that Lazarus, like most of her Zionist contemporaries, never pressed them to move there. On the contrary, her Jewish state was to be the refuge of Russian Jews, while their American

coreligionists pursued their fate on "the pastoral plains of Texas and the golden valleys of the Sierras."[10] Similarly, Louis Brandeis, the master jurist who headed the Federation of American Zionists, opposed leaving the New World for the very Old: "Every American Jew who aids in advancing the Jewish settlement in Palestine, though… neither he nor his descendants will ever live there, will likewise be a better man and a better American for doing so," he wrote.[11] Tellingly, the federation he led boasted a total membership of just ten thousand, a tiny minority of the three million Jews living in America in 1912. Of the nearly two hundred delegates to the First Zionist Congress in Switzerland in 1897, only four hailed from the United States.

American Jewish wariness of Zionism had multiple sources. There was, for example, the fear of arousing accusations of dual loyalty and the desire to integrate into the country whose Puritan founders had fashioned as the new Israel. At base, though, was the belief that *de goldene medine* furnished the ultimate framework for Jewish continuity, the culmination of a millennia-long search. American Jews might still pray in Jerusalem's direction—albeit in ever-dwindling numbers—and follow the biblical calendar, but the Jews' salvation, they maintained, lay not in the land of milk and honey, but in the home of the free and the brave.

This belief was the basis of the ambivalent—and frequently outright hostile—relationship to Zionism displayed by virtually all of the major American Jewish organizations founded in the first half of the twentieth century. American Jews might build schools and hospitals in Palestine and replenish its forests, but trading the terra sancta of Cleveland or Brooklyn for that of Petah Tikva or even Jerusalem was widely regarded as sacrilege. American Jewish immigrants to Palestine such as Golda Meyerson (later Meir), Judah Magnes, and Henrietta Szold were therefore very much aberrations, representing a mere 0.3 percent of the pre-state Jewish *Yishuv*.

It took the Holocaust—and American Jewry's guilt over failing to rescue European Jews—to awaken Zionist sentiment in the United States. Mass rallies on behalf of Jewish statehood were staged in every major city, and pro-Zionist telegrams deluged the White House. And yet, many

American Jewish organizations continued to keep their distance from the state-making project in Palestine and opposed any call for North American *aliya*. Indeed, no sooner had the United States recognized Israel's independence than American Jewish activism subsided into the passive stance once described by the late Arthur Hertzberg as "Israel-watching"—following Israeli items in the news, voting for pro-Israel politicians, and perhaps touring the country, but never contemplating moving there. Indeed, in 1956, when the Eisenhower administration threatened Israel with sanctions in retaliation for Israel's invasion of Egyptian territory during the Suez crisis, the Jews of America remained silent.

If American Jews by and large refrained from embracing Zionism, the Zionists, even more comprehensively, rejected America. From the Zionist point of view, America was and would remain an anomaly: a modern, mostly Christian country that separated church from state, sheltered millions of Jewish refugees, and offered Jews full equality and—in theory, at least—unlimited opportunities. Instead of grappling with that anomaly, however, early Zionist thinkers for the most part chose to ignore it. Theodor Herzl, the Zionist movement's peripatetic founder, never visited the United States, nor did he acknowledge the uniqueness of the American Jewish experience. Even Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion, who spent much of World War I in New York, never confronted the challenge to Zionism posed by the American solution. Instead, he clung to the concept of *shlilat hagola*—negating the diaspora—whether it be in Paris, Kiev, or Boston. "There are no Zionists in America," he famously quipped, "only Jews."

Still, vitiating America on the ideological level did not mean shunning it economically or politically. From the time of Judah Touro, the nineteenth-century New Orleans philanthropist who financed the construction of the first Jewish neighborhoods outside of Jerusalem's Old City, to Macy's owner Nathan Straus, for whom the Israeli city of Netanya is named, Palestinian Jews welcomed American Jewish money. Indeed, the fifty million dollars

raised by Golda Meir in the United States in 1948 proved pivotal in deciding the outcome of Israel's struggle for independence. And as early as the 1930s, Ben-Gurion realized that America would determine Palestine's fate, not Britain. Not coincidentally, the first formal call for Jewish statehood was issued not in London or even Jerusalem, but in 1942 at New York's Biltmore Hotel.

American Jews dropped pennies in their Jewish National Fund *pushke*s and danced the *hora* at their weddings while Israelis named a youth village after American Zionist leader Abba Hillel Silver and a kibbutz after Brandeis (*Ein Hashofet*—the Spring of the Judge), yet neither recognized the other's claim to primacy in solving the Jewish problem. Israelis defended their preeminence by pointing out America's indifference to Jewish suffering during World War II and the skyrocketing rates of intermarriage and assimilation among American Jews. In response, American Jews called attention to the mounting body count in the very state that was supposed to safeguard the Jewish people, and to the ultra-secular Israeli youth denigrated by Rabbi Hertzberg as "Hebrew-speaking goyim."[12] Israeli immigrants to the United States were for many years denounced by their countrymen as *yordim*—literally, "those who descend"—while American Jewish immigrants to Israel risked being labeled expatriates or, worse, weirdos.

This conflict of Jewish utopias was debated in semi-official fashion in a correspondence between then-prime minister Ben-Gurion and American Jewish Committee president Jacob Blaustein in 1950. The issue was whether, as Ben-Gurion claimed, Israel represented world Jewry, or whether, as Blaustein countered, American Jewry spoke for itself and further served as co-defender of the diaspora. Underlying the debate, however, was the controversy over which country, Israel or the United States, constituted the genuine Zion—the end, in the Fukuyaman sense, of Jewish history. "American Jews vigorously repudiate any suggestion that they are in exile," Blaustein wrote. "To American Jews, America is home." Desperate for donations, Ben-Gurion backed down on Israel's plenipotentiary status, conceding that the Jewish state "speaks only on behalf of its own citizens" and that

American Jews "owe no political allegiance to Israel." In return, Blaustein pledged that American Jews—"within the framework of their American citizenship"—would continue to assist Israel financially.[13]

The correspondence between Ben-Gurion and Blaustein established the relationship between Israel and American Jewry over the next seventeen years. Israel refrained from publicly challenging the American diaspora's legitimacy, and American Jews contributed generously to the building of the Jewish state. Israel still offered instant citizenship to all diaspora Jews under its Law of Return, but American Jews overwhelmingly rebuffed it. Then came the Six Day War.

The overnight transition from an Israel besieged by Arab armies poised for its destruction to an Israel whose guns pointed into many Arab capitals and whose flag flew over the Temple Mount catapulted American Jewry from a position of utter vulnerability to one of unprecedented empowerment. Israel's military miracle enabled American Jews to "walk with their backs straight"—as though they had previously walked hunched over—and, thanks to the ensuing American-Israeli alliance, to fulfill Brandeis's dictum of being "better Americans" by unstintingly supporting Zionism. The victory also accorded American Jewry immense clout in domestic politics, primarily via Congress, which ratified ever-expanding aid packages for Israel. Indeed, though established in 1953, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee—AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobby—emerged as an influential force in American foreign policymaking only in the mid-1970s, after Israel became the world's foremost recipient of American largesse. Contrary to the often asserted anti-Zionist charge that Israel owes its strength to American Jewish power, in fact, American Jewish power was forged by Israel.

Yet, in spite of their mutually reinforcing relationship, the Israeli and American Jewish utopias remained divided. While unreservedly pro-Israel, American Jewish organizations still refused to endorse aliya as a praiseworthy

or even valid option for their members. They fervidly condemned Jonathan Pollard, the American Jew imprisoned in 1986 for spying for Israel, proclaiming their paramount allegiance to America and not the Jewish state. Israelis, for their part, refrained from publicly impugning the right of American Jews to reside in the United States. But they never ceased dreaming of someday absorbing that community, of witnessing an American aliya grander and more distinguished than that from the former Soviet Union.

An indication of the breadth of the rift surfaced in the mid-1990s in an initiative mounted by Ezer Weizman, then Israel's flamboyant president. Weizman proposed enacting "a new covenant of the Jewish people" based on mutual recognition between Israel and the diaspora. Specifically, Israel would acknowledge the authenticity of diasporic life in exchange for the diaspora's acknowledgment of aliya as a viable means of ensuring Jewish continuity. Jewish communities in South America and Europe thrilled to the idea—most embraced their Zionist-defined identities—but American Jewish leaders balked at it. Their reasons were the same adduced by Blaustein decades earlier, namely, American Jews are not in exile, and Israel is not their homeland. Israeli representatives also proved incapable of relinquishing their Zionist exclusivity and retreated from Weizman's plan. The covenant was never bound.

Today, immigration levels from North America to Israel still remain modest—this despite the robust efforts of organizations such as Nefesh B'Nefesh and other aliya facilitators. And while the American Jewish community is less likely to disparage any of its members who move to Israel, many Israelis still routinely dismiss American *olim* as unbalanced. To be sure, the twenty-first century has nevertheless seen some blurring of the lines between the American Jewish and Israeli utopias. For example, by sending myriads of its youth to the Birthright Israel program, American Jewry has implicitly conceded that a ten-day trip to Israel can better cement Jewish solidarity than ten years of Hebrew school in the United States. And far more Israelis have relocated to the United States with far less stigma attached to their "descent."

But despite signs of a growing closeness between the two communities, the schism still endures and, in some dimensions, deepens. Israel, having surpassed the United States as home to the world's largest single concentration of Jews, is rapidly generating a national identity independent of the diaspora. Young Israelis, especially, are eschewing American cultural influences for those of India, China, and the Middle East. And the Israeli economy, currently growing at a rate of more than 5 percent, is annually less in need of American aid.

American Jews, at the same time, are less ideologically and emotionally dependent on Israel. The trend is especially pronounced among those American Jews too young to remember the Six Day War and pummeled with images of intifadas and Israeli incursions into Lebanon. Only about half of them, according to one recent study, expressed comfort with the idea of a Jewish state, and even fewer said they would be traumatized by Israel's annihilation. It is not surprising, then, that Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, garnered such a passionate reception among American Jews: The heroes of the novel, set in 1948, are two American Jewish cartoonists, but there is no mention of the 600,000 real-life Jewish heroes who struggled for statehood that year.[14] American Jews also celebrated Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* with its fantasy of a world in which Israel does not exist but is nonetheless plagued by Zionist conspiracies.[15] Once reliant on Israel for their military pride, American Jews can today point to venerable synagogues at both West Point and Annapolis which fly the red, white, and blue alone, without the blue and the white. And Hollywood can produce films like *The Hebrew Hammer* (2003), directed by Jonathan Kesselman, a slapstick comedy about an American Jewish sleuth who, in seducing women and defeating foes, needs no help from Israeli agents such as Zohan.

In fact, *Zohan* is to date the most blatant assertion of American Jewish utopianism. Unlike *Munich*, which depicts Israel as mirthless and haunted, and Brooklyn as bright and almost Edenic, Adam Sandler's Israel is a paradise, and his Brooklyn a veritable battlefield. And yet, in spite of this disparity,

Zohan still chooses America. "All the fighting, what's it all for?" he asks—a question that could readily be answered by evoking three thousand years of Jewish history, the revival of Hebrew national culture, and the dignity of Jewish independence. But none of those considerations counterbalance Zohan's need to move to America, where he knows precisely for what he fights—the opportunity to intermarry and cut hair in a mall.

More accurately than he probably intended, A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* crowned *Zohan* the "finest post-Zionist" comedy he had ever seen.[16] "*Zohan* isn't pro-Israel or pro-Palestine," commented Eric Kohn of *Cinematical*, "it's pro-America."[17] In its own naïve way, the film tries to bridge the gap that divides Israelis and Palestinians. But at the same time, it only accentuates the gap separating Israelis from American Jews. Regrettably, the chasm still yawns between these conflicting utopias, between contrasting dreams of national and personal freedom and disparate formulas for Jewish survival.

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Notes

1. Stephanie Zacharek, "You Don't Mess with the Zohan," Salon.com, June 6, 2008, www.salon.com/ent/movies/review/2008/06/06/zohan.

2. Alex Dorn, "'You Don't Mess with the Zohan' Review," Ugo.com, www.ugo.com/ugo/html/article/?id=18699.

3. Wesley Morris, "Hairy Situations," *Boston Globe*, June 6, 2008.

4. Oren Shamir, "American Bourekas Movie," Achbar Ha'ir online, June 22, 2008, www.mouse.co.il/CM.articles_item,514,209,24439,.aspx [Hebrew]. The comment is facetious: Israel has not had a Ministry of Information since 1975.

5. Samuel Freedman, "In the Diaspora: Rak b'America," *Jerusalem Post*, June 20, 2006.

6. David Horovitz, "Editor's Notes: YES STARS Beats a Tonsorial Zionist Gagfest," *Jerusalem Post*, June 26, 2008.

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8. "The Pittsburgh Platform," *Declaration of Principles: 1885 Pittsburgh Conference*, www.zionism-israel.com/hdoc/Pittsburgh_Platform_1885.htm.

9. Abram S. Issacs, "Will the Jews Return to Palestine," *Century* 26:1 (May 1883).

10. Emma Lazarus, "By the Waters of Babylon, Part V: Currents," in *The Poems of Emma Lazarus*, vol. 2, p. 104.

11. Louis D. Brandeis, *Brandeis on Zionism: A Collection of Addresses and Statements* (Washington, D.C.: Zionist Organization of America, 1942), p. 28.

12. Arthur Hertzberg, "The Advantages of Jewish Nervousness," *Haaretz*, June 30, 1995 [Hebrew].

13. "An Exchange of Views: American Jews and the State of Israel," in *American Jewish Year Book* 53 (1952), pp. 564-568.

14. Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (New York: Random House, 2000).

15. Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

16. A.O. Scott, "Watch Out, He's Packing a Blow-Dryer," *New York Times*, June 6, 2008.

17. Eric Kohn, "Fan Rant: Adam Sandler, Republican Actor," Cinematical, June 3, 2008, www.cinematical.com/2008/06/03/fan-rant-adam-sandler-republican-actor.