

Heralds of Zionist Thought

Overview

This article examines the “heralds of Zionism”—Orthodox rabbis operating in the early-to-mid 19th century who transformed Jewish theology from passive-spiritual-Divine redemption to active-practical-natural redemption. These theological revolutionaries called for immigration to the Land of Israel, agricultural cultivation, and human activism to hasten redemption, fundamentally shifting Jewish identity from rabbinical to biblical models.

The Historiographical Debate

- Scholars disagree on identifying heralds of Zionism; some trace them to the 17th century, others deny their existence entirely.
- Sokolow claimed 17th-century rabbis were first heralds; Dinur cited R. Judah Hehasid (1700) as opening a new era.
- Katz identified three heralds (R. Kalisher, R. Alkalai, Moses Hess) operating from the 1860s, using “social productivity” as the test.
- Critics like Citron and Ettinger argued heralds had no impact on Hovevei Zion (1881) or the Zionist movement (1896).
- Some claim heralds were only recognized retrospectively in the 20th century when Zionist parties constructed their narratives.

Core Theological Revolution

- Mainstream Jewish theology held redemption would come from heaven with no human action; the Temple itself descended without human involvement.
- Based on Song of Songs 2:7, tradition taught against “hastening the redemption” (Bavli Ketobut 111a).
- Herald's reinterpreted Kabbalah: “arousal from below” (*it'aruta diletata*) by humans triggers “arousal above” (*it'aruta dele'ela*) in the Divine world.
- They transformed Jewish theology to require human initiative through immigration, land purchase, and agricultural labor.
- R. Bibas and R. Kalisher called for establishing a Jewish army to facilitate natural redemption.

The Key Herald's

Name	Years	Location	Key Contributions
R. Judah Bibas	1789–1852	Corfu, Greece	Called for Jewish army, land cultivation; influenced by Greek War of Independence (1821–1832)
R. Zvi Hirsch Kalisher	1795–1874	Germany	Published <i>Drishat Zion</i> (1862); advocated natural redemption through settlement and agricultural work
R. Judah Alkalai	1798–1878	Semlin, Serbia	Published <i>Shma Yisrael</i> (1834); equated settling the land with redemption itself
R. Eliyahu Guttmacher	1796–1874	Graetz, Germany	Kabbalist who taught that 130 Jewish families in Israel would trigger redemption
R. Nathan Friedland	1808–1883	Taurig, Lithuania	Published <i>Kos Yeshua Unehama</i> (1858); claimed redemption depends on Jews' desire for the land
R. Jozsef Natonek	1813–1892	Hungary	Published <i>Mashiach</i> (1861); called for national revival and establishing a Jewish state

Individual Teachings and Philosophies

- R. Kalisher met Rothschild in 1836 to purchase the Temple Mount; believed daily offerings would hasten redemption.
- R. Kalisher taught redemption comes "at a slow pace" through human nature, not sudden Divine intervention.
- R. Alkalai declared: "Our exile began with clay and bricks...our redemption will begin with clay and bricks."
- R. Alkalai stated agricultural work *is* redemption; buying estates provides "a part in the world to come."
- R. Bibas witnessed the Greek revolt and concluded Jews could similarly reclaim their land by force.
- R. Guttmacher believed the triangle of Jews-Torah-Divinity, separated by exile, would reunite through settlement.
- R. Friedland emphasized cultivation makes the land respond with fruit—the clearest sign of approaching redemption (based on Bavli Sanhedrin 98a).
- R. Natonek identified three Messianic stages: political faith, political realization, prophetic realization ("light unto the nations").

Contrasting Jewish Identities

- Biblical-Jewish identity: labor-oriented (especially farming), militarily active, offensive ethos, monotheistic but resembling contemporaries in lifestyle.
- Rabbinical-Jewish identity: emerged after failed revolts (66–135 CE); Torah study as supreme value, no manual labor, passive-defensive ethos.
- Sages reinterpreted concepts: freedom became Torah study (Mishna Avot 6:2); bravery became conquering impulses (Mishna Avot 4:1); war became intellectual Torah debate.
- Rabbinical Judaism preached subservience: "bend your head before wicked

- people" (Bavli Yevamot 121a); "be soft like a reed" (Bavli Ta'anit 20a).
- Heralds of Zionism sought to restore biblical-Jewish identity: activism, agricultural labor, military readiness, national consciousness.

Factors Driving the Theological Revolution

- **Emancipation:** granted hope but also disappointment; Damascus and Rhodes blood libels (1840) showed Jews remained vulnerable.
- **European nationalism:** Greek War of Independence (1821–1832), 1848 Springtime of Nations, French (1789) and American (1776) revolutions.
- **Kabbalistic date:** Zohar designated 1840 (5600) as year when "gates of wisdom will open"; many Jews immigrated to Israel that year.
- **Literary influence:** Lord Byron's *Hebrew Melodies* (1815) contained proto-Zionist themes; widely translated and cited by Jewish intellectuals.
- **Christian support:** George Bush's 1844 book on Ezekiel sold over 1 million copies, advocating Jewish return to Zion.

Influence on Later Movements

- R. Shmuel Mohilever, spiritual leader of Hibbat Zion (1882), was influenced by R. Kalisher's natural redemption theology.
- Theodor Herzl's connections: father Yaakov subscribed to R. Natonek's newspaper; grandfather was R. Alkalai's shofar blower.
- David Ben-Gurion recognized Rabbis Alkalai and Kalisher as "architects of the Zionist enterprise."
- Secular Zionism adopted Moses Hess as a herald to balance the exclusively rabbinic list.
- General Zionism embraced activism and productive labor values without religious faith.
- Religious Zionism adopted the heralds' teachings completely; named streets after them; teach their writings in schools.

Impact on Modern Israeli Society

- **Secular Zionists:** embraced biblical-Jewish identity (activism, farming, military) but without religious faith; redefined Jewish festivals with agricultural/national meanings.
- **Religious Zionists:** adopted activism and labor alongside Torah study and halakha; slogan "Torah Va'avoda" (Torah and Labor) reflects heralds' influence.
- **Ultra-Orthodox:** rejected heralds' theology; maintain rabbinical-Jewish

- identity; believe in passive redemption; Torah study as sole supreme value.
- Heralds' revolution succeeded through multi-generational process: Hovevei Zion (1881) → Zionist movement (1896) → State of Israel (1948).

Key Terms & Definitions

- **It'aruta diletata:** Kabbalistic term for "arousal from below"—human initiative that triggers Divine response.
- **It'aruta dele'ela:** Kabbalistic term for "arousal above"—Divine response to human action.
- **Hovevei Zion:** "Lovers of Zion" movement (1881) that preceded political Zionism.
- **Natural redemption:** belief that redemption comes through human effort rather than Divine miracle.
- **Miraculous redemption:** traditional belief that redemption will come suddenly from heaven without human involvement.
- **Biblical-Jewish identity:** ancient Jewish character emphasizing agriculture, military activity, and offensive ethos.
- **Rabbinical-Jewish identity:** post-revolt (post-135 CE) Jewish character emphasizing Torah study, passivity, and defensive ethos.
- **Haluka:** charitable funds sent to support Jews living in Jerusalem; heralds opposed this system.