

# Richard Gottheil the Reluctant Father of American Zionism

By Jerry Klinger

*To minds like these Zionism came with the force of an evangel. To be a Jew and to be proud of it; to glory in the power and pertinacity of the race, its traditions, its triumphs, its sufferings its resistance to persecution; to look the world frankly in the face and to enjoy the luxury of moral and intellectual honesty; to feel pride in belonging to the people that gave Christendom its divinities, that taught half the world monotheism, whose ideas have permeated civilization as never the ideas of a race before it, whose genius fashioned the whole mechanism of modern commerce, and whose artists, actors, singers and writers have filled a larger place in the cultured universe than those of any other people.*

- Henry Wickham Steed

*Long winds of time have blown away the footprints of the past: so many dreams, so many ideals and hopes, forgotten memories. Not knowing or wishing to know, we live in a separate today, comfortably believing that our tomorrow will only be as it was yesterday.*

- How naïve.

- William Rabinowitz

## **Did his father make him do it?**

Richard James Horatio Gottheil was born in Manchester, England October 13, 1862. He came to America at age 11 when his father, Gustav Gottheil (1827-1903), accepted a position as the assistant Rabbi of the largest Reform Temple in New York, Temple Emanu-El. Rabbi Gottheil eventually became the chief Rabbi and one of the most influential, well-known and controversial Reform Jewish leaders in America. In 1897, Rabbi Gottheil attended the first Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland. He was the most prominent American to respond to Theodor Herzl's call.

It was an act of faith that brought condemnation and vilification upon Rabbi Gottheil from the American Reform community and the American Orthodox community. American Reform Judaism viewed the struggling birth of Zionism as a betrayal of loyalty to America. Zionism, they said, was unstable. It tasted bitterly of the dangerous, ancient Anti-Semitic accusations - dual loyalty. It threatened the position of the Jews in the new Zion of America.

American Orthodox Judaism equally reviled the infant Zionist movement. Zionism was a betrayal of faith in God's ultimate promise of redemption. To the Orthodox, it denied the coming of the Messiah.

For both extremes of American religious life, the Zionists had no right to confer upon themselves the mantle of Jewish leadership. They both said Zionists had no right to say the potential opportunity for the redemption of Israel and the land was here and now. Rabbi Gottheil and his son Richard, along with an extraordinary pantheon of later American Jewish Zionist visionaries, who followed them, said otherwise. Their faith and the future became their legacies. Their words, their efforts, their names are known but to a few today.

Gustav Gottheil was extraordinary. He openly recognized beneficial change and grasped it. His son, Richard, was reticent. Richard Gottheil is remembered not for his own long, energetic Zionist endeavors but because of the efforts of others that were associated with him. Yet, even as a reclusive academic, he never separated from his own vision of the great cause.

Richard James Horatio Gottheil graduated from Columbia College in New York, 1881. He declined his father's suggestion to become a Rabbi. He preferred to advance his interest in Semitic languages and culture at the great universities of Berlin, Tuebingen, and Leipzig, earning a PhD. in 1886. Gottheil returned to Columbia where he became professor of Semitic languages when the chair of rabbinical literature was endowed in 1887. He spent his life as a respected but shy scholar focusing on the meaning of being a Jew through educational organizations such as the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis, the Judean, as a founder and president of the (Jewish) Religious School Union in New York; and his association with Jewish Chautauqua Society. Richard James Horatio Gottheil is remembered today, not for his many Jewish academic interests but as the reluctant father of American Zionism.

Theodor Herzl's electrifying book, *Der Judenstaat*, the Jewish State, quickly reached across the Atlantic Ocean. His ideas flowered first, not in New York with its huge, growing Jewish population, but in Chicago, Ill. Two Jewish converts to the Zionist vision, Bernard Horwich, a *maskil* (intellectual) – a merchant, and Leon Zolotkoff, a Yiddish journalist and later editor of the *Tageblatt* in New York, organized the first Jewish Zionist organization in America, the Chicago Zion Society. The Midwestern soil, first to grow Zionism, had been actively furrowed by Christians, "Restorationists", lead by an inspired fundamentalist, William Blackstone. Restorationist Christians believed that the second coming of Jesus could be advanced if the Jews would return to Palestine. If the Jews would reclaim, rebuild the long neglected land, the Messianic age would begin.

Chicago was not to become the center of American Jewish life, New York was. The rapidly expanding Zionist ideal needed a Jewish figurehead of stature and leadership.

Rabbi Gustav Gottheil was elderly and unable to take on the responsibility. His son Richard was approached. Dr. Gottheil was Professor of Oriental Languages at Columbia, head of the Oriental Department of the New York Public Library, member of the Board of Editors of Funk & Wagnall's Jewish Encyclopedia and author of the encyclopedia's comprehensive article on Zionism, an acknowledged scholar, author and Jewish academic leader. He looked like a dignified American. His image validated Zionism as respectable. His place in the community negated the accusation of dual loyalty. Dr. Gottheil was, it seemed the ideal face to market American Zionism.

Professor Gottheil enjoyed the non-stressful life of an academic recluse. He was not a dynamic presence or public speaker. He probably became a committed Zionist because of the dominant presence of his father. Professor Gottheil's Turkish born wife actively worked to encourage his Zionist interest. In 1900 she became the first president of *B'Not Hadassah*.<sup>1</sup>

The Federation of American Zionist Societies of New York, (FAZ) was formed December 15, 1897; Richard Gottheil, President, Herman Rosenthal, Rabbi Joseph T. Bluestone, vice presidents. Most remarkable and fortunate for the nescient American Zionist movement was the choice of secretary for the FAZ. Gottheil had been advisor, sponsor and friend to a young Columbia student who energetically and dynamically became the first Zionist secretary. His name was Rabbi Stephen Wise. For the next 45 years, Wise would become one of the enshrined, respected leaders of the American Zionist and World Zionist movements.

July 4 and 5, 1898 the first FAZ convention was called. One hundred delegates, 20 from outside of New York, met at the B'nai Zion Club on Henry Street in the growing, self imposed, Jewish *Ghetto* of New York's lower East Side. Professor Gottheil, the reluctant, dutiful figurehead, proceeded with his responsibilities as President of FAZ. Though he was ever desirous of returning to the quiet life of academia, Gottheil attended the second Zionist Congress in Basel establishing relationships with Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau. Rabbi Wise, secretary of the FAZ, attended as the American correspondent for William Randolph Hearst's the New York Journal. Wise wrote back to the elder Rabbi Gottheil after meeting Herzl, "This is a cause that will allow Jews to fight back. We have been stepped on long enough."<sup>2</sup> The impact of the second Zionist Congress on Wise was inspiring, on Gottheil stressful.

Returning to New York, Gottheil, maintained his professorial look. "He was always the professor – tall and erect, prosaic, precise, unruffled, seldom allowing his feelings to influence his writing or his speaking."<sup>3</sup>

"Professor Gottheil shunned publicity; he did not mind the trickles of adulation accorded him as President; but his official duties irked him beyond endurance. He hated to preside at meetings. He was careless in procedural matters and embarrassed by ceremonies in which he had to take part. He was horrified by emotional debates. He felt that his status as a professor was being sullied by his being President of a propaganda organization. He ran away from official duties. He usually limited his official addresses at Zionist meetings to the necessary items, speaking briefly. He became more and more nerve-provoked by his status, especially as the practical affairs of the Zionist Federation made no visible progress."<sup>4</sup>

Gottheil and Wise were ill equipped to seek what every organization needs to survive – money. FAZ, loosely structured with smaller semi-independent chapters who sometimes paid dues but mostly did not, was desperately short of funds. Gottheil and Wise realized that they had no means of getting their ideas heard or promoting the policy of the FAZ except by word of mouth. They scraped a few hundred dollars together and borrowed a few hundred more to establish *The Maccabean*, the first English language Zionist magazine. Interestingly, the magazine was published in English not in Yiddish, the lingua franca of the immigrant Jews. The American Jewish immigrant culture was changing, settling in to life as Americans.

Louis Lipsky, born in Rochester, N.Y. in 1876 to Polish Jewish immigrants, was hired as the managing editor. Lipsky became the written voice of FAZ, and later the Zionist Organization of America, for the next fifty plus remarkable years. Lipsky's fluid, intuitive writing, his insightful stewardship and direction, reached the eyes of hundreds of thousands. The Maccabean eventually affected the opinions of millions of American Jews and non-Jews. Lipsky remained editor of the Maccabean all his life. He died in 1963.

Gottheil never truly desired to lead American Zionism. He saw only failure and resistance in the early years of FAZ. His personality did not respond well to the aggressive nature of Zionism's birthing struggle. At the same time, Gottheil deeply admired and respected Theodor Herzl. He dutifully plowed on.

In 1902, Theodor Herzl, the hands on administrator, sent Gottheil a suggestion that he hire Jacob de Haas as the new secretary of the FAZ. De Haas had been the secretary of the First Zionist Congress. Stephen Wise had left to take a position as a Rabbi in Portland, Oregon. Gottheil desperately needed an energetic, involved secretary. The work of running the FAZ was more than he could endure. With de Haas assuming the role of secretary, Gottheil, though elected president one more time, serving until 1904, virtually vanished from the Zionist movement for the rest of his life. He continued writing and supporting the Zionist effort but he never again undertook a leadership role.

De Haas assumed the leadership of the fragmented Zionist movement. He accomplished one thing above all other activities that cemented his name in the pantheon of American Zionism. He befriended the best known, and admired secular Jew in America, Louis Brandeis. De Haas introduced Brandeis to the ideas of Theodor Herzl and ideals of Zionism. After a relatively short period of examination and self-examination, Louis Brandeis became an ardent, committed Zionist in 1908. More importantly, Brandeis would head the FAZ and the American Zionist movement by 1912.

Whereas Gottheil was a respected American Jewish figurehead; he was not interested in the administrative or political and economic struggle to establish Zionism, Brandeis was. Brandeis threw himself into the cause with a religious fervor that belied his own lack of Jewish religious values.

Zionism was not well received by the Jewish immigrants. Most of them were insecure in their new homes, being only a few years removed from the fear of the pogroms. The immigrants focused on adjusting, acculturating, learning English. They were fearful that the extraordinary freedom of the new Zion would be lost if they strayed too far, pushed to hard, made themselves too visible. They feared they would be sent back.

By 1912, American Zionism had reached a membership of only 10,000 out of a population of almost 2 ½ million Jews. Active Zionist membership was minimal though sympathies might have been much larger. Jews simply did not want to get involved. This changed with the emergence of the strongest and most visible symbol of Jewish acceptance into American life – Louis Brandeis.

Louis Brandeis was an assimilated Jew from Kentucky. He had had little formal association with Jews being more closely identified with the Brahmanism of the Bostonian social elite. Ironically, Louis Brandeis, who was to become the energetic exponent in word and deed, the legitimizer of American Zionism, descended from Judaism's darkest heretical rejecters, the Jacob Frank heresies.

Jacob Frank converted, as did many of his followers, to Christianity believing in a perverted salvation theory that through the debasement of Judaism the Messiah could be forced from heaven. It was from heretical adherents of Frankist beliefs that Louis Brandeis, the spiritual and moral salvation, the galvanizer, the leader of American Zionism, and reputedly even his wife, descended from.

Under Brandeis' leadership, the American Zionist movement grew from 10,000 members to over 200,000 members by 1920. There were a number of factors to explain the rise of American Zionism under Brandeis. World War I was a key factor. Contemporary history is focused on the Holocaust and its aftermath. Forgotten is the reality of the mini – Holocaust of European Jews during World War I. The slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Eastern European Jews for simply being Jews was not lost on the American Jewish community. American Jews were keenly aware that the American escape valve had been cut off and soon would be fully cut off to Jewish refugees. World War I had almost totally shut out Jewish immigration to America. The recent immigrants knew of their families' traumas in Europe and were distraught with powerlessness. Zionism was an answer.

The acculturation of American Jewry to America and its values was another reason for the sharp rise of American Zionism. For the first time it was safe, it was o.k., it was responsible to stand up and protest Jewish oppression. It was proper to promote Jewish self-interest, as did many other American immigrant groups such as the Irish, the Germans and the Italians. America was different. America was unusual. America gave a freedom to Jews that they had not known for two thousand years.

In America, Jews could protest against wrongs committed against them by non-Jews. 1913, a Jewish manager of an Atlanta, Georgia pencil factory was accused of the horrific murder of a young female employee, Mary Phagan. Leo Frank, the manager, a 28 year old Jewish man from Brooklyn, born in Texas, a member of B'nai Brith, was accused.

"Hang the Jew, Hang the Jew..." This was the cry of the furious mob outside the Atlanta courthouse where Leo Frank, a Northern Jew, stood trial after his arrest in 1913 for a murder he did not commit. Anti-Semitism hung heavy in the courtroom, as Frank was found guilty and sentenced to death. Though a courageous governor later commuted the death sentence to life imprisonment, Frank never did serve the term. In August 1915, the "Yankee Jew" was lynched by a mob calling themselves a "vigilance committee."<sup>5</sup>

The controversial trial of Leo Frank attained national notice. Former Presidents of the United States stood protesting the travesty of justice; that alone, was astonishing to the immigrant Jew. . Incredible, for the immigrant and their children, was a protest march of 50,000 Jews in the lower East Side of New York in support of Frank. The "Cossacks" were not called out.

Jews organized legal defense organizations. The Anti-Defamation League was established. Its banner motto is... "to stop the defamation of the Jewish people... to secure justice and fair treatment for all."<sup>6</sup> The motto seems lifted from the meaning of the Zionism of Rabbi Stephen Wise. Zionism, to him, demanded the fair treatment of the Jewish people and in turn, all people.

In later decades American Jews would repeatedly exercise their new freedom. Jews prominently and proudly stood shoulder to shoulder with others demanding societal improvement for all oppressed and disadvantaged people suffering under discrimination. Most notably was the role Jews played in the American Civil Rights movement.

The immigrant Jew was becoming an American Jew. It was acceptable to speak as an American Jew with interests of their own and not be afraid. Zionism grew. Under the able leadership of Louis Brandeis, the friend of President Woodrow Wilson, the soon to be first Jew on the American Supreme Court, Brandeis understood the liberating effect Zionism had on the "Jewish Nation." He expanded on a central idea; to be a Good American one must be a Zionist. Jewish idealism, Jewish nationalism, Jewish values of freedom and democracy, and Zionism became identical with Americanism.

Zionism grew in absolute numbers and acceptability. For the vast majority of Jews, becoming Americans, achieving economic opportunity and security remained much more important than the "pipe dreams" of Zionism, Palestine and a relative handful of dreamers. The American Zionist movement languished after Brandeis left the leadership until the rise of Hitler in the 1930's.

What exactly was and is early American Zionism? What did it advocate, what were its values and beliefs?

Richard Gottheil, the first president FAZ, vanished from Zionist development. He had disappeared into the life of the reclusive professor of Semitic Languages at Columbia. He reappeared in 1914 writing a book on Zionism. The book published by the Jewish Publication Society of America is titled *Zionism* and subtitled *Movements in Judaism*. The 235-page book reviews the history, development and beliefs of Zionism. It was Gottheil's Zionist faith, his ideals, outlined in intellectual format. In an address Gottheil summed up the Zionist position.

*"But I must not detain you much longer. Will you permit me to sum up for you the position which we Zionists take in the following statements: -*

*We believe that the Jews are something more than a purely religious body; that they are not only a race, but also a nation; though a nation without as yet two important requisites — a common home and a common language.*

*We believe that if an end is to be made to Jewish misery and to the exceptional position which the Jews occupy, — which is the primary cause of Jewish misery, — the Jewish nation must be placed once again in a home of its own.*

*We believe that such a national regeneration is the fulfillment of the hope which has been present to the Jew throughout his long and painful history.*

*We believe that only by means of such a national regeneration can the religious regeneration of the Jews take place, and they be put in a position to do that work in the religious world which Providence has appointed for them.*

*We believe that such a home can only naturally, and without violence to their whole past, be found in the land of their fathers — in Palestine.*

*We believe that such a return must have the guarantee of the great powers of the world in order to secure for the Jews a stable future.*

*And we hold that this does not mean that all Jews must return to Palestine.*

*This, ladies and gentlemen, is the Zionist program."*<sup>7</sup>

Louis Brandeis incorporated Gotthiel's intellectual definitions of Zionism into his public speaking. Brandeis was willing to fight. Gotthiel was, constitutionally, not capable of fighting.

Brandeis understood and was willing to touch the raw, deep suppressed emotions of pride and dignity of the Jewish American. Brandeis speaking before the conference of Eastern Council of Reform Rabbis in New York, June 1915, quoted extensively from "*The Hapsburg Monarchy*."<sup>8</sup> A book written by a non-Jew.

*"And the Zionist movement has brought like inspiration to the Jews in the Diaspora, as Steed has shown in this striking passage from 'The Hapsburg Monarch.'"*

*'To minds like these Zionism came with the force of an evangel. To be a Jew and to be proud of it; to glory in the power and pertinacity of the race, its traditions, its triumphs, its sufferings its resistance to persecution; to look the world frankly in the face and to enjoy the luxury of moral and intellectual honesty; to feel pride in belonging to the people that gave Christendom its divinities, that taught half the world monotheism, whose ideas have permeated civilization as never the ideas of a race before it, whose genius fashioned the whole mechanism of modern commerce, and whose artists, actors, singers and writers have filled a larger place in the cultured universe than those of any other people. This, or something like this, was the train of thought fired in youthful Jewish minds by the Zionist spark.*

*Its effect upon the Jewish students of Austrian universities was immediate and striking. Until then they had been despised and often ill-treated. They had wormed their way into appointments and into the free professions by dint of pliancy, mock humility, mental acuteness, and clandestine protection. If struck or spat upon by 'Aryan' students, they rarely ventured to return the blow or the insult. But Zionism gave them courage. They formed associations, and learned athletic drill and fencing. Insult was requited with insult, and presently the best fencers of the fighting German corps found that Zionist students could gash cheeks quite as effectually as any Teuton,*

*and that the Jews were in a fair way to become the best swordsmen of the university. Today the purple cap of the Zionist is as respected as that of any academical association.*

*'This moral influence of Zionism is not confined to university students. It is quite as noticeable among the mass of the younger Jews outside, who also find in it a reason to raise their heads, and, taking their stand upon the past, to gaze straightforwardly into the future.'*<sup>9</sup>

Richard James Horatio Gottheil passed the remaining years of life quietly as an unassuming Professor. He wrote one more book that touched indirectly on Zionism, a biography of his father.<sup>10</sup> In the end Richard Gottheil was likened, biblically, to Isaac the son of Abraham. He was a transitional figure between the true founder and the later progenitors of the Jewish people.

The father of the American Zionist movement was not Richard but his father Gustav. Rabbi Gustav Gottheil recognized the fire, the dream, the hope that Zionism could bring to the Jewish people. But, it was too late in his life. Rabbi Gustav Gottheil instilled enough Zionist faith in his son to carry the mission forward, through Richard, to a new generation, a new future.

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<sup>1</sup> [Memoirs in Profile](#), by Louis Lipsky, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975, pg. 212

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cjh.org/education/essays.php?action=show&id=20>

<sup>3</sup> [ibid.](#) [Memoirs in Profile](#), Lipsky, pg. 213.

<sup>4</sup> [Ibid](#) [Memoirs in Profile](#), Lipsky, pg. 213.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.adl.org/ADLHistory/print\\_adl\\_history.asp](http://www.adl.org/ADLHistory/print_adl_history.asp)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.adl.org/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.wzo.org.il/doingzionism/resources/view.asp?id=1862>

<sup>8</sup> Henry Wickham Steed, [the Hapsburg Monarchy](#), London, Fourth Edition, 1919, pp. 175-76

<sup>9</sup> [Brandeis on Zionism](#), A Collection of Addresses and Statements by Louis D. Brandeis, Zionist Organization of America, 1942, pgs. 31-33.

<sup>10</sup> [The life of Gustav Gottheil. Memoir of a priest in Israel](#), Bayard Press, 1936