

## **Moses Hess: The Red Rabbi**

### **Part 1: A Purpose and a Programme**

As we mark 70 years of Israel it is easy to see why, with all it has accomplished in such a short time, the annals of our State are celebrated as miraculous. We are just over a century from the Balfour Declaration, which began the process of turning the dreams of visionaries into a state. We chant in Hatikva, “We haven’t abandoned our hope, the hope of two thousand years...” In so doing, we imagine the fervent prayers of Jews who experienced Crusades, expulsions and pogroms, thrice daily in the Amida, joyously at the end of each Seder – a return to Zion, next year in Jerusalem.

This perspective overlooks the wonder of the emergence of Zionism. Two hundred years ago there was no Zionism. The movement which brought Israel into fruition was not an inevitable progression from the darkness of exile. It was the child of some remarkable thinkers whose inspiration was not so much a nostalgia for the past, but the prescience of a problem and a vision for a future.

Today, “Zionism” has become a tarnished expression. One may not be “anti-Semitic” in polite company, but “anti-Zionism” is acceptable, fashionable, possibly even mandatory in some quarters.

Jews who have been born since the establishment of Israel and especially post '67, as well as many of the Jews born in Israel relate to the modern State, its security and its development. The dreams of its founders call for less attention than its immediate needs and protection. The youth movements from Bnei Akiva and Beitar, through Habonim and Hashomer Hatzair all struggle to honour and celebrate the Zionist visions of their founders. While Aliya remains strong, few contemporary Olim are pioneers in the swamp draining, new-civilisation in the “wilderness recovering” sense of that word.

This mini-series looks at the contribution of one of the early Zionist visionaries. Indeed, Moses Hess was so early, that he is often referred to as a “precursor” to Zionism. His life was unusual, his writings remarkable. His father was a Rabbi and his wife (if they did marry)

was a Catholic. His friends and literary collaborators were Marx and Engels. In 1862 he published "Rome and Jerusalem". Written as twelve letters, beginning with "The Return Home" it tells of a personal journey and the need for a national aspiration.

Before "Rome and Jerusalem" pilgrims had travelled to the Holy Land to die. Kabbalists had followed their mystic Rabbis to the Holy Cities of Tiberias, Hebron and Tzfat. No one followed a programme because there was no programme. No one considered ruling the land because we were under a sentence of exile. In publishing "Rome and Jerusalem" Hess articulated purpose and a programme. The concept, which became Zionism, was born.

Moses Hess was born in Bonn in January 1812. Napoleon and his family controlled much of Western Europe. Hess' father, David, was a Rabbi, who moved to Cologne in 1816, leaving Moses with his grandfather to continue his religious schooling. When he was 13, his mother died and he joined his father in Cologne but three years later broke with his father and religion.

Hess mixed with the Young Hegelians, venerating reason and freedom, strongly dismissive of religion as irrational. In the late thirties, Hess attended philosophy classes at Bonn University (though never attained any qualification). He became a passionate socialist, writing anonymous treatises. In "The Holy History of Mankind" 1837, Hess anticipated a socialist Europe. Inspired by the theory of Jewish Commonwealth, he noted the ethical ruling the political. He saw in the French Revolution the opportunity for a renewal of social unity and the disappearance of private property.

In 1841 he published "The European Triarchy" in which he called for the conjoining of German philosophy and freedom, French political activism and English pragmatic prowess. He saw the German future as siding with France and England rather than with Russia; creating a Western Europe unity.

In 1840, there was a Blood Libel in Damascus and thirteen Jewish notables were imprisoned and tortured for the alleged ritual murder of a monk. That year Hess wrote "The way and manner in which the persecution of the Jews in Europe, even in enlightened Germany, is looked upon, must necessarily cause a new point of departure in the Jewish life. This tendency demonstrates quite clearly that in spite of the degree of education to which the

Occidental Jews have attained, there still exists a barrier between them and the surrounding nations, almost as formidable as in the days of religious fanaticism. Those of our brethren who, for purposes of obtaining emancipation, endeavor to persuade themselves, as well as others, that modern Jews possess no trace of a national feeling, have really lost their heads.”

Reflecting on this passage twenty years later, Hess explains “my own Jewish people who, since that time, began to interest me and enchant me more and more. Images of my unfortunate brethren who surrounded me in my youth haunted my thoughts, and the long-suppressed feelings burst forth with fresh vigour. The pain and agony which, during the Damascus affair, was only a transient feeling, became now a dominating trait of my character and a lasting mood of my soul. No more did I seek to suppress the voice of my Jewish consciousness, but on the contrary, I carefully followed up its traces and was pleasantly surprised when I found; in my old manuscripts, a passage anticipating my present-day Jewish aspirations.”

From these beginnings, Zionism was born.