

~ INTRODUCTION ~

We planned this issue to coincide with the sixtieth anniversary of the State of Israel. But as the articles demonstrate, Maryland Jews have been engaged with the land of Israel not just since the birth of the state in 1948, but going back to a time shortly after the birth of our own nation. From early nineteenth century travelers in the Holy Land to late nineteenth century Zionists to modern-day Marylanders with an Israeli branch of the family, we have visited, contributed to, argued about, and marveled at this special place that has had profound meaning for Jews everywhere.

The articles here reveal how deeply Maryland Jews have been involved in Israel, and also the diversity of that engagement. The Baltimore Jewish community, especially, has had an impact well out of proportion to its size. Baltimoreans such as Henrietta Szold, Jacob Blaustein, and Leon Uris have greatly influenced both the development of the Jewish state and the relationship between America and Israel. But presented here is not

just the story of Zionism triumphant. It's also the story of a struggle to comprehend and question the meaning of Israel, and especially to reflect on its implications for American Jews. Finally, it's the story of how ordinary people, making personal decisions, have found themselves in the middle of one of the central narratives of the Jewish people.

Of course, Jews in the diaspora have had a centuries-long intimate relationship with the ancient land of Israel. But one of the first American Jews to consider his relationship to the Holy Land in its more contemporary form was Baltimorean Mendes I. Cohen, whose letters and journals form the basis of an article by Deborah R. Weiner. During his travels in Palestine in the 1830s, long before there was even an idea of a Jewish state, Cohen constantly confronted situations that caused him to consider his dual identity as an American and as a Jew. As the patriotic citizen of a young nation that embraced religious freedom, he had little difficulty reconciling these two identities.





Henrietta Szold and her mother Sophie, during Szold's first trip to Palestine in 1909. JMM 1992.242.7.19.

This would become more difficult in later decades. Zionism—the Jewish expression of the nationalism that swept nineteenth century Europe—forced diaspora Jews to look on the Holy Land, and their relationship to it, in a new way. The contradictory trends of emancipation and integration into the surrounding society on the one hand, and the rise of modern antisemitism on the other, provoked myriad and complex responses to the idea of a Jewish homeland. The challenges of turning the Zionist dream into a reality complicated the matter still further. Within every large Jewish population, within smaller Jewish communities, and indeed, within individuals themselves, conflicting ideas and movements vied for ascendancy.

Left: View of Jerusalem from southeast, showing city walls, the Dome of the Rock, and al-Aqsa mosque, circa 1900–1940. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Right: Jacob Blaustein and David Ben-Gurion, 1967. Courtesy of the American Jewish Committee.

Even the great Henrietta Szold, during her long tenure as a leader in building up Jewish life in Palestine, struggled to reconcile her belief in Palestine as a cultural and spiritual homeland for Jews with the thorny realities she faced on the ground. We reprint in its entirety a never-before-published 1909 letter to her mentor Judge Mayer Sulzberger, which describes her very first impressions of the Holy Land and reveals that from the start, she recognized both the contradictions and the possibilities inherent in the Zionist project. We also excerpt the autobiography of longtime Baltimore Hebrew Congregation Rabbi Morris Lazon, who bravely accepted a leadership role in a significant yet increasingly unpopular faction within American Jewry that expressed grave misgivings about Zionism in the mid twentieth century. The passage exemplifies the doubts and reservations that thoughtful Reform Jews grappled with in their attempt to fully comprehend the implications of the Zionist enterprise in the years leading up to the birth of the state.

As the leader of the American Jewish Committee, businessman and citizen-diplomat Jacob Blaustein attempted to resolve some of these contradictions on the level of international politics and diplomacy in the post-World War II era. His critical role in creating a framework for the relationship between the State of





Shoshana Cardin outlines a strategy for addressing the "Who is a Jew" crisis at a Council of Jewish Federations assembly, 1988. Photo by Robert A. Cumins. Reprinted with permission.

Israel and American Jewry is recounted by Mark Bauman. Both Lazaron and Blaustein contended with a major issue raised by the fulfillment of Zionism: what did the creation of a Jewish state mean for diaspora Jewish identity? While the relevance of this issue has faded somewhat over the years, it periodically comes roaring back with the flaring of the "Who is a Jew" controversy, which reached a high point in the 1980s when Baltimorean Shoshana Cardin served as national president of the Council of Jewish Federations. We feature a chapter from her memoir, recently published by the Jewish Museum of Maryland, that reveals the painful behind-the-scenes negotiations she and other representatives of American Jewish organizations conducted with Israel's leaders to diffuse a potential crisis in Israeli-American relations.

On a more personal level, the eminent poet Karl Shapiro captures the raw yet complex emotions that the founding of Israel brought forth in American Jews.

Rabbi Morris Lazaron. Courtesy of the American Jewish Archives.

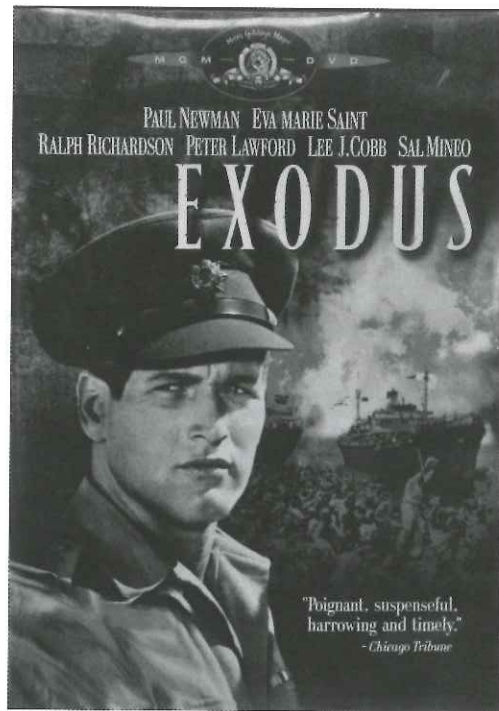
His 1948 poem "Israel" reveals fissures in the American Jewish psyche that the state's birth could not quite mend, as the narrator undergoes a powerful shift in consciousness yet remains "chained" to his chair. Such was not the case with fellow Baltimorean Ralph Finkel, a bit younger than Shapiro, but whose upbringing and U.S. military experience roughly mirrored the poet's. Finkel returned to Baltimore after his stint in the Marines and within a year he was bound for Palestine, smuggled into the country to serve in the War of Independence. He settled in Israel after the 1948 War, building his life there as Raphael ben-Yosef. A man of action rather than words, ben-Yosef nevertheless graciously agreed to write a brief memoir exclusively for this issue, detailing his journey from Chauncey Avenue to the Ayin campaign to his Israeli home in Eilat. Though he describes a singular experience, his article serves to remind us of the many Marylanders who have made aliyah during the past sixty years.

Ben-Yosef was not the only Marylander involved in the pivotal events that led directly to the birth of



Israel in 1948. Most notably, in 1947, Baltimore Zionists secretly purchased and outfitted a Chesapeake Bay steamer that sailed to France, picked up a load of Holocaust survivors, and headed toward Palestine, proudly unfurling its new name as it approached land: *Exodus 1947*. The ship, of course, did not reach its destination, being turned back by the British after a fierce battle. But the incident became a *cause celebre* that advanced the cause of Israel's statehood, "the ship that launched a nation." The *Exodus* became even more famous in 1958, when Baltimore native Leon Uris wrote the novel of the same name, a stirring fictionalized account of the events leading to Israeli statehood. In 1960 Uris's international bestseller achieved further renown with the release of the film version, directed by Otto Preminger and starring Paul Newman. Historians credit the novel and film with being the most important influence in shaping the American public's view of the young state of Israel in the years before the Six-Day War. Here we showcase a 1995 *Jewish Times* article on Leon Uris's return to his old high school, City College, to talk about the school's influence on his life (he flunked English three times) and why he wrote *Exodus* (because "he was not raised as a Jew.")

Uris's book helped boost American political support for the fledgling state at a time when such support was sorely needed. We feature as well the story of another Marylander who played a role in advancing the political conditions necessary to create and maintain Israeli statehood—in this case, at the beginning of the process. Rabbi Schepsel Schaffer was the only



Leon Uris's *Exodus* has seen many incarnations. Here it is on DVD.

American delegate sent to the first World Zionist Congress in 1897 by a Zionist organization, Baltimore's Zion Association (*Hevrat Zion*). Avi Y. Decter explains why Schaffer's status as a representative of a local Zionist group was important to Theodore Herzl's goal of building a credible international congress of the Jewish people, which he considered to be a key component in his strategy for achieving a Jewish state.

As you can see from our Chronology, the articles in this issue provide only a glimpse of the many and various ways that people and organizations from our state have connected with

the land of Israel. The subject is far too large to provide a comprehensive treatment in a publication of this sort. Rather, we have tried to capture the diversity of Maryland Jewry's engagement with Israel by highlighting a wide-ranging cast of characters—from communal leaders and institution builders to soldier, poet, novelist, world traveler, and concerned skeptic. Each tells a different part of the story; together, they suggest how complex that story is.

For the past sixty years, Israel has served as a cornerstone of American Jewish identity. No matter how we as individuals choose to relate to it, our choice helps to define who we are and what we believe in. In this issue we present the definitions that some Jewish Marylanders have arrived at. We hope you will find it meaningful.

—Avi Y. Decter and Deborah R. Weiner