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Zionism and Middle East Curriculum

The relationship between American Judaism and Zionism has received inadequate consideration in university courses on the Middle East. It is possible to study the issues presented by the Israeli-Arab confrontations without learning anything about the issues and dilemmas that Zionism presented for American Jewish leaders. Whatever one thinks about the controversies, there is certainly an inadequacy in terms of the attention given that is in need of remedy.

This article does not purport to provide the final word on why Brandeis abandoned his secularism, so that would be a false criticism. It rightly points out that his upbringing was not religious and that he would have been described at one point as a deist. Alice, his wife, belonged to a Unitarian church and he donated to the First Church Unitarian in Boston. My opinion has always been that Alice had a lot of influence on the evolution of Justice Brandeis beliefs, and that is something I would have stressed had the following essay been mine.

Alice Goldmark Brandeis (1866-1945) was born in Brooklyn. Her parents, Joseph and Regina Goldmark, were immigrants from Vienna. She was sent to the Sunday School of the First Unitarian Church in Brooklyn. Alice married Louis in March 1891 and they had two daughters, Susan and Elizabeth. She was a vigorous proponent of women's suffrage, organized labor, and the Zionist movement. She fought for the exoneration of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, and supported the presidential ambitions of Robert La Follette. Her sister, Alice Goldmark Adler, was the wife of the founder of the Ethical Culture movement, Felix Adler. She met Adler at First Unitarian services.

So perhaps Alice had a major part in the development of the religious side of Louis Brandeis. Stuart Vyse argues: "In 2004, the Washington Post reported that 80 percent of Jews in Israel were secular. The percentage is undoubtedly much lower in the United States, but here, too, secular Jewish life is common. I would love to be a member of that group, but it is not possible for me. Just as conversion to the Judaism of one’s birth is impossible; so too is conversion from some other faith—or none—to secular Judaism. Becoming Jewish is a serious business. You cannot simply declare yourself a Jew. As a result, the person who is born Jewish is granted the choice of being a religious or a secular Jew. Though it might never have occurred to him to be anything but a religious person, this was a choice that Brandeis retained."

In general, despite all the attention given to bringing neglected influences into history, we still have a long way to go in explaining why things happened. This is a case in point. Certainly, as the paper argues, Aaron Aaronsohn was significant, prominent and respected intellectual that he was, but one might also want to know something about that Sunday School in Brooklyn. What we have here is a fine door opener on a promising area of research.

Paul Rich
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Aaron Aaronsohn and the Zionist Conversion of Justice Louis Brandeis

By Barbara Pfeffer Billauer, Institute of World Politics

Abstract

By the time Aaron Aaronsohn died at the age of 44, he had achieved international fame as a scientist, drawn the boundary map for the newly conquered Palestine and co-founded the NILI spy-ring to advance the Zionist cause – for starters. Amongst the many prominent people he influenced was Justice Louis Brandeis, the man who persuaded Woodrow Wilson to support the Balfour Declaration. Brandeis’ sudden conversion from a secular, assimilationist Jew into an ardent Zionist at the age of 54 has defied logical explanation. This article details Aaronsohn’s role in converting Brandeis to the Zionist cause.

Introduction

By the time he was killed at age 44 in an airplane accident on his way to the Paris Peace Conference, Aaron Aaronsohn had achieved international fame as an agronomist, drawn boundaries for the newly conceived Palestine, been decorated by the British government, lectured across America on dry farming, co-founded the NILI spy-ring (which contributed to the downfall of Ottoman rule in Palestine) and devised strategy that enabled General Allenby to take Jerusalem. Offered the Hilgard Chair of Agronomy at Berkeley, he refused and returned to Palestine to establish the first Agricultural Research Station, administer American Relief efforts, create training programs for science teachers and further international seedling-exchange. Between 1914 and 1919 he was an advisor to the US government, the Ottoman government, the British government and Zionists at the Paris Peace Treaty.

Of all those Aaronsohn influenced in America, perhaps Justice Louis Brandeis was most crucial to the existence of the State of Israel. The circumstances surrounding Brandeis’ sudden and late-in-life metamorphosis from a secular, assimilationist Jew into an ardent Zionist have defied logical explanation.

“The question of who converted Brandeis still fascinates scholars,” Melvin Urofsky tells us. Jonathan Sarna calls Louis Brandeis's mid-life "conversion" to Zionism "an enduring mystery." And if Brandeis’ conversion to Zionism is curious, his assuming the mantle of leadership may be more puzzling. While some biographers recognized an Aaronsohn-influence, this article probes Aaronsohn’s role, noting the importance of his scientific stature as driving force of his impact.

The Zionist Conversion of Louis Brandeis

The son of devoutly secularist parents, Louis Dembitz Brandeis tiptoed into Zionism in 1910. He was 54 years old. Five years earlier Brandeis believed in total assimilation of Jews into American society. But by 1914 he recognized that the ‘Jewish race’ was unique, noting that
"assimilation is national suicide. There must be a land where the Jewish life may be naturally
led, the Hebrew language spoken, and the Jewish spirit prevails, and that land was "our fathers'
land" -- Palestine."\(^8\)

Brandeis’ delayed conversion is even more astounding considering his background.\(^9\)
Born to followers of False Messiah, Yaakov Franck,\(^10\) Louis Brandeis\(^11\) was raised as a deist\(^12\).
“Of all the prominent Jews of the early twentieth century, none had so little identification with
Jewish life as he.”\(^13\) His early religious life was so impoverished that wishing to hear Jewish
musical liturgy, he and his sister drove to synagogue one Yom Kippur –completely ignorant that
this was of the most egregious of sins.\(^14\)

Most historians credit Brandeis’ full conversion to a ‘chance’ meeting in 1912 with
Jacob deHaas,\(^15\) editor of the Boston Jewish Advocate, Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations
Board member and once-secretary to Herzl.\(^16\) Yet after meeting de Haas, eight months would
elapse before Brandeis would engage in even the most minimal Zionist activity\(^17\) and another
year would follow before he would take an active role.\(^18\),\(^19\).

“Prior to December 1910, Brandeis took no public part in Zionist affairs and was
neither regarded as a Jew locally\(^20\) nor nationally…. Nor is he is mentioned in the Jewish
Encyclopedia.”\(^21\) When Brandeis granted an interview to de Haas’ newspaper\(^22\),\(^23\) in late 1910,
Zionism was a theoretical question to him. The interview\(^24\) reflects Brandeis’ ambiguity; he sees
himself as a sympathetic observer rather than an interested player: "I have a great deal of
sympathy for the [Zionist] movement and am deeply interested in the outcome of the
propaganda,” he says. “These so-called dreamers\(^25\) are entitled to the respect and appreciation of
the entire Jewish people.”\(^26\) Six years later, Brandeis would write, “the rebirth of the Jewish
nation is no longer a dream. It is in the process of accomplishment in a most practical way and a
most wonderful one.”\(^27\)

Brandeis’ Zionist transition begins slowly. Between 1910 and 1912, Brandeis made small
donations and occasionally attended Jewishly-related meetings.\(^28\) Extolling the spiritual nature
of the Jews, he noted their greatest triumph was ‘being a priestly people.’ Nevertheless, his
assimilationist streak was his driving force. A 1910 speech attacks the divided loyalty of
hyphenated-Americanism among the newly arrived immigrants.\(^29\) The ghosts of divided loyalty
to Zion and allegiance to the adopted country of his parents would haunt him throughout his
transformation and would require exorcism before Brandeis could fully embrace Zionism.

In 1912 Brandeis was ready to go public.\(^30\) His “affiliation with the Zionist
Organisation” [sic] was reported at the Cleveland Zionist convention\(^31\) in April\(^32\) and in May–
three months before meeting deHaas -- he addressed the Harvard Menorah Society.\(^33\) In
December, the fifty-six year old Brandeis gave his second Jewishly-related talk\(^34\) - about the
valor of Jews and the Miracle of Chanukah.\(^35\),\(^36\)

Sometime in 1912 something changed Brandeis.\(^37\) Some say it was the encounter with
deHaas who told Brandeis’ about the Zionism of his revered uncle, Louis Dembitz.\(^38\) Some say
Brandeis’ role in mediating a garment workers dispute involving Russian Jews touched the
socially-conscious Brandeis. One theory mentions Brandeis’ exclusion from Wilson’s cabinet
because he was not sufficiently Jewish. Magnates of the American Jewish Committee claimed
Brandeis was not a ‘representative Jew’ -- code for someone who would bring Jewish support and some feel Brandeis’ adopted the mantle of Jewishness to garner a ‘Jewish’ seat in the new administration.

None of these explanations suffice. Three years would elapse between the garment and Brandeis first (somewhat ambivalent) proclamation of Zionist sympathies and Brandeis’ pivotal meeting with deHaas came in August of 1912, by which time he had already evidenced Zionist interest. Notwithstanding the consensus that deHaas launched the juggernaut of Brandeis’ metamorphosis, meeting deHaas hardly galvanized him. Rather, de Haas appears to have inspired an educational foray for which deHaas played guru. DeHaas, himself, admits that “no single person could have moved Brandeis to become a Zionist. He knew what he was doing and did it deliberately.” To be sure, Brandeis acknowledged that “Jacob deHaas, was active originally in bringing me into the Cause.” However, this tribute hardly qualifies as the epiphany-generating moment credited to deHaas.

Seven months would elapse after meeting deHaas before Brandeis took a public stand. On Sunday, March 20, 1913, Brandeis presided over a rally in Boston featuring Nahum Sokolow, international Zionist celebrity and past Secretary of the World Zionist Organization. Sokolow spoke for two hours. Brandeis spoke for ten minutes.

Sokolow’s speech generated a tepid response from Brandeis, “who stated he was present in order to evidence his personal affiliation with the Zionist movement…a great ideal attempt to accomplish what had become the greatest Jewish need.” Brandeis told the audience that “the message Mr. Sokolow brought to Boston may sometime become a reality and the Jewish people may establish the national state that they have aspired to and longed for so long….” The bland statement, while certainly pro-Zionist, is hardly a ringing endorsement. And Sokolow’s dream seemed far from reality – even for the most committed. The American Zionist movement was moribund, a situation hardly exciting enough to jolt Brandeis from his patriotic stupor and wrest him from the competing forces of allegiance to his parent’s homeland and loyalty to his people’s.

Brandeis’ sole reported Zionist activity during the following month is a letter to the president of the Federation of American Zionists, Harry Friendenwald, suggesting a meeting. The Federation turns to Aaron Aaronsohn, beseeching his help and begging him to “find time to discuss matters that will arise at the meeting.” There is no record of the meeting, yet one month later Brandeis morphs from a restrained proponent into an ardent and impassioned Zionist.

One would be remiss by not asking: what happened?

At precisely the same time Sokolow swept the American Zionist scene, Aaron Aaronsohn was becoming an icon in both agro-circles and the Zionist camp. His signature discovery of wild wheat had captured the imagination of the newly industrialized America. The Maccabaean, the Zionist Journal to which Brandeis contributed in 1911, commented on his discovery, its value to humanity, his establishment of a Jewish Agricultural Station, his championing of the Zionism and his success in recruiting supporters with nothing less than awe.
About the time of Aaron’s wild-wheat discovery, Brandeis was championing the use of scientific evidence in legal decisions and social policy. To those familiar with ‘the Brandeis brief’ - the first Supreme Court brief relying almost exclusively on scientific data, it should come as no surprise that Brandeis’ love affair with Zionism might be catalyzed by a scientist. Aaron Aaronsohn: botanist, geologist, agronomist, hydrologist, cartographer, strategist and spy - was the perfect candidate.

Aaron Aaronsohn: The Strange Force that Ignited Brandeis’ Zionist Fervor

Born in Romania, Aaron Aaronsohn immigrated to Palestine in 1882 at the age of six, where he added Hebrew, Arabic and French, and later Turkish to the Rumanian and Yiddish he already spoke. Following High School in Zichron Yaakov, he attended the French Agricultural College in Grignon under the patronship of Baron Edmund Rothschild.

Eight years later Aaronsohn would participate in a geological expedition of the Dead Sea led by Professor Max Blanckenhorn before accompanying Professor Otto Warburg (later President of the World Zionist Organization) in a botanical exploration of Palestine. After cultivating an expertise in botany, he religiously pursued geology. Soon Aaron was acknowledged as an expert on Palestine's flora and geological structure. It was said that “he could read fossils as a pious Jew reads the scriptural portions of the week.”

In 1906, Aaronsohn rose to prominence for discovering the elusive *Tritticum dicoccoides* (Wild Emmer wheat), near Rosh Pina, in northern Israel. The weather-resistant variety called ‘the mother of wheat’ was reminiscent of that grown in the early Neolithic period, ostensibly leading to the invention of agriculture and civilization at the Fertile Crescent. Aaron’s discovery was cited for its historical value along with the possibility of using it to engineer hardier and more resistant wheat.

In short order he created insect-resistant wheat, gluten-rich wheat, sesame seeds that produced more oil, olives more resistant to disease, five new strains of barley, an early-ripening grape and superior mulberries (from which he intended to begin a silk industry). He discovered exotic dates from Egypt, introduced improved production techniques, cover-crops for his citrus orchards, plants that kept sand-dunes from shifting and wind to power his agricultural station.

The monumental wheat discovery brought him to the attention of David Fairchild. Dr. Fairchild, a botanist who brought cherry trees to America along with 200,000 other agricultural species, managed the Office of Seed and Plant Introduction of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Through Fairchild’s intercession Aaronsohn was welcomed by the US Department of Agriculture where he would make a searing impression on everyone he met.

Fairchild would later write, "I soon discovered I was in the presence of an extraordinary man." This sentiment was proffered by many Americans who met him, among them Roscoe Pound, later Dean of Harvard Law School, James Angell, Dean of the University of Chicago,
Thomas Eliot, President of Harvard University and Eugene Hilgard, esteemed Professor of Botany at University of California, Berkley.

William Bullitt, himself an outstanding Yale graduate, adviser to President Woodrow Wilson and later Franklin Roosevelt’s first ambassador to Moscow, said of Aaronsohn: “He seemed a sort of giant, an elder day-like Prometheus. He was the quintessence of life: of life when it runs torrential, prodigal and joyous. Many men, no doubt, are as great as he was intellectually, though I have never known his peer, but if they are great intellectually, they are not also great emotionally, as he was: great in courage, in sympathy, in desire, in tenderness, in swift human understanding; great at once in dealing with statesmen and children, with scientists and artists, great at once in humour and constructive imagination.”

“He was, I believe, the greatest man I have ever known,” Bullitt wrote of Aaronsohn.

Bullitt would transmit this sentiment to Brandeis (who acknowledges Bullit’s worldly sophistication as ample basis to judge Aaronsohn). Bullitt’s testimony is instructive: “I remember him in Washington - how diplomats sat open mouthed, astonished by his knowledge and insight and …warmed by his picture of the Zion to be. I remember him in Paris . . . how from the first he foresaw the end of the tragic drama, how unerringly he picked his way through a thousand diplomatic pitfalls, how wise he was in counsel and how strong in friendship. . . . The Jewish race had many brilliant leaders but when Aaron died I believe it lost the man who, before all others, could kindle the hearts and minds of men of other nations to active sympathy. And not Zion alone will suffer for his loss.”

Nor was Bullitt’s impression impetuous and short lived. Twenty-five years after Aaronsohn’s death, Bullitt would laud Aaronsohn, saying that had he lived, he could have prevented the schism that caused Brandeis’ resignation from official Zionism. Bullitt, who also served as Roosevelt’s ambassador in France, never forgot Aaronsohn. One Christmas Day in 1941, Bullitt, now President Roosevelt’s emissary to the Middle East, travelled from Jerusalem to Zichron Yaakov, a three hour trek, to visit Aaron’s surviving brother and sister.

Justice Felix Frankfurter, Brandeis’ protégé, who led the American Zionist delegation at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, said: “you cannot speak too generously of his genius, of his originality, of his resourcefulness, the power of his personality to set aflame the mind and spirit of others. [He was] one of the few men whom I have ever known who really had heroic stature,” summing up with the accolade, “I do not need all the fingers of my two hands to include him [Aaronsohn] among the most memorable persons I have encountered in life.”

Aaronsohn’s impact in no small measure derived from his forceful personality which oftimes blinded many to his prodigious scientific accomplishments. But to Fairchild, himself a remarkable and highly-esteemed agronomist, Aaronsohn was the paragon of scientist; more than a brilliant botanist, Aaronsohn had earned Fairchild’s highest accolade, he was a “plantsman.” Fairchild, who called Aaronsohn’s contributions to American agriculture “invaluable,”
believed that but for Aaron’s death, he would have been responsible for creating 'a type of experimental agriculture which would be epoch-making.'

The Chain of Events:

On Aaronsohn’s arrival in the United States in 1909 (where he perfected his rudimentary English in the span of a month), Section Chief Fairchild introduced Aaronsohn to America’s scientific elite. After making an awesome impression on so many people, the then 33 year old Aaron was offered the Chairmanship of the Department of Agronomy at the University of California at Berkeley. He refused. However, he did receive US government authorization to open the first American Agricultural station in in Palestine. Aaronsohn’s next objective was to have the USDA fund the facility. When the USDA declined, Aaron asked Fairchild for introductions to wealthy Jews who might finance it privately.

And so begins the chain of events leading to Aaronsohn’s meeting – and influence on– Brandeis.

Fairchild introduced Aaron to Dr. Cyrus Adler of Dropsie College. Adler introduced Aaron to Oscar Strauss and Judge Julian Mack whose friendship with Aaron would develop an intensity that rivaled the friendship of Jonathan and David. Strauss introduced Aaronsohn to his brother Nathan (co-founder of Macy’s, and sponsor of Aaronsohn’s health- work in Palestine) and to attorney Louis Marshall. These contacts were important for two reasons: many became trustees of the agricultural station, and some became instrumental in the Zionist movement.

Louis Marshall, a noted business lawyer, was one of America’s most influential Jewish communal leaders. To Marshall, searching for a raison d’etre for contemporary Jews, Aaronsohn was a Godsend (figuratively if not literally). Marshall writes that after meeting Aaron he wondered whether a new type of pioneer Renaissance man was being created, saying, “he has certainly made a conquest of me.” After a few days Marshall and Aaronsohn raised $20,000 for the agricultural station. However, to obtain US government approval Aaronsohn needed to guarantee outside funding for five years and obtain American incorporation. The incorporation was easy. Marshall incorporated the station in New York. The money issue was more vexing.

Mesmerized by Aaronsohn’s ability to merge modern science with passionate Zionism, Marshall introduced Aaronsohn to the banker Jacob Schiff, mentioning that Aaronsohn’s scientific supporters included German geologist Professor Schweinfurth and the USDA. Then Marshall introduced Aaron to Julius Rosenwald (founder of Sears Roebuck). Rosenwald had a keen interest in education (particularly science-education) as a means for oppressed peoples to gain stature, and Rosenwald was blown away Adler noted that Rosenwald was generally deliberate and precise in all his decisions, save once: the immediacy and intensity with which he agreed to be a part of Aaronsohn’s agricultural work and later his Zionist activities.

Marshall, Rosenwald and Judge Mack promoted Aaron’s project. Mack was to become Aaron’s best American friend and Rosenwald would emerge as Aaron’s staunchest champion and most dedicated supporter, notwithstanding his skittishness at becoming a Zionist.
Within a year of touching down on American soil, Aaronsohn had raised the necessary funding and established the first American-type research laboratory in Asia (or the Orient, as Fairchild called it) in Atlit, near Haifa. Its opening was noteworthy enough to be reported in the prestigious journal ‘Science’.

During his first U.S. visit, Aaron also met Henrietta Szold, founder of Hadassah. Szold had been active in Zionist Affairs since 1898 but her first trip to the Holy land was in 1909, shortly after meeting Aaronsohn. Arriving in Palestine, Szold visited Aaron’s family in Zichron Yaakov, a two day trip from Jerusalem. Following her visit, Szold became a trustee of Aaron’s Experiment Station.

Aaron’s impact on Julian Mack was even stronger. Mack, a lifelong champion of social justice and friend of Jane Addams’s Hull-House had come earlier to his Jewish identity. By 1906 he was Vice President of the American Jewish Committee. His conversion to Zionism was nudged along by Justice Felix Frankfurter, but it was Aaron who created the rhapsody. Mack “fell under the spell of Aaron Aaronsohn,” confiding that “I never felt as close to any man as I did to Aaron from the time I first met him on his original visit to America. The “intimate friendship with that brave, romantic, Palestinian man of science, Aaron Aaronsohn,” was important in Mack’s Zionist evolution.”

With promises of money from his new-found friends and the beginnings of a fruitful collaboration with Mack, Aaron returned home where he continued his experiments, renewed contacts with Agriculturalists world-over and reached out to new ones. During the next year his correspondence with botany professors, agricultural experts and government agents in the United States, Ceylon, South Africa, Egypt Germany, and Hawaii reached the thousands. More than a venue for sharing advice and literature, the connections resulted in a brisk seed-exchange that fostered international agriculture -- and advertised the Jewish presence, each letter emblazoned with the logo: ‘The Jewish Agricultural Station in Palestine.’

Following his visit to the United States, Aaron published a paper under the auspices of the US Department of Agriculture. In the 64 page monograph, Aaronsohn identified no less than a dozen variants of plant species from Palestine suitable for cultivating in California, which, he noted, was remarkably like Israel in topology and climate. His advice on improving husbandry further increased his prominence.

In May, 1910 the New York Times reported that Professor Schweinfurth, "the king of botanical explorers," considered Aaronsohn’s work to be the most important botanical discovery which occurred during his lifetime, and one which scientists all over the world are saying may result in untold benefit to humanity in the indefinite increase it promises in the world's supply of wheat, has just become known outside of strictly scientific circles.

Aaron comments: “I am very proud that for the first time since prehistoric times, man has again tried sowing the prototype of wheat, this work has fallen on Jews escaped from the ignoble massacres of Russia, Jewish workers working on Jewish ground, the historic cradle of the race.” R. Chodot, Professor of Botany at the University of Geneva, concurred: “Is it not a singular coincidence that this young Jew should rediscover… the origins of our civilization… in The Land of Judea.” Chodot then details Aaronsohn's expeditions around the Dead Sea and on
the West Bank at Tel Nimrim, Ain Hummar and El-Mazara -- which he refers to as Moab or the Valley of the Jordan -- in the land of Judea.

By early 1912 word of Aaronsohn’s work spreads. On January 6, 1912, Louis Brandeis is introduced to Aaronsohn’s work through a lecture given by Julius Rosenwald. Brandeis writes his brother, “the talk is the most thrilling[ly] interesting I have ever heard,” and tells his brother to send for Aaron’s USDA Bulletin.

Ten months later, Aaron was invited by the Canadian Minister of Agriculture to attend a conference in Lethbridge, Alberta. This visit to North American would last almost a year, during which Aaron would lecture on behalf of agriculture, fund-raise for his Agricultural Station, proselytize for Zionism -- and meet Brandeis for the first time.

Aaron travels to the conference by way of the United States, arriving on October 20. The New York Times glowingly announced the visit, reporting on the historic and technological importance of Aaron’s discovery. “By cross-breeding,” the Times notes, “the young discoverer hopes to find a hardier and better type of wheat.” Following the Canadian conference Aaron tours British Columbia, Oregon, Washington, California and Arizona, meeting agricultural experts and farmers. Aaron began his trip eastward three months later. Shortly after New Year’s Aaron arrives in Chicago where he is hosted at Mack’s ranch. Mack’s 17 year old daughter, Ruth, falls for Aaron, an obsession which would last her lifetime.

Aaron’s public appearance dance-card was full – but the press never tired of reporting on his doings: On January 6, 1913 Julius Rosenwald hosts a lunch in his honor at the luxurious Blackstone Hotel. Several hundred prominent Chicagoans gather to hear Aaron speak, including the Dean of the University of Chicago. On January 7, Aaron lectures at the Chicago chapter of Sigma Xi Society; on January 27 he speaks a Hadassah gathering in New York; on February 19, he joins a commission of civic leaders sponsored by Julius Rosenwald to visit Tuskegee University; on March 3, he lectures to the Chicago Hebrew Institute, where Julius Rosenwald calls him “one of the greatest leaders of the Hebrew race in the East.”

Cyrus Adler writes to Judge Mack (now in New York) about setting up a lecture for botanists at the Museum of Natural History integrating cold science and Zionism. On March 6 Aaron gave two lectures, one at the Chicago Chapter of Sigma Xi entitled “Evidences of Recent Progress in Engineering” and one at the City of Chicago Club, entitled “The Discovery of Wild Wheat and Its Possibilities for the United States.”

Aaronsohn’s talks were about his scientific work but the press reported on his goings with the enthusiasm of a cub-reporter assigned to cover a movie icon. The Sunday Magazine of The New York Times carried a two-page spread. Its readers could not but be impressed with Aaronsohn’s discoveries, the importance of cross-breeding and possibilities of enhanced food production with higher nutritional value.

While the majority of his audiences were scientists or science-phillic, Aaron never lost an opportunity to preach Zionism. In his March 6 speech to the Chicago Club he interspersed scientific material with an exposition on the contribution of Jews to Society-at-large and to Palestine in particular. Following a brilliantly conveyed analysis of the agricultural similarities between California and Palestine, he launches into an impassioned portrayal of the importance of Jewish colonists to Palestine and to improving the lot of the Arabs.
“When we came to Palestine,” he proclaims, “extremely few Arabs knew what a wagon or a carriage was. Even now they have not word or ‘carriage’ or ‘wagon.’ They use the European word. They did not know that a horse could be used to draw a wagon or a plow. In fact, when we began buying the first horses in that country we disgraced— as the Arabs used to say—a beautiful creature which was born, in their opinion, only for saddle purposes. … But tempted by money they quieted their consciences…Now we find thousands of farmers using horses… and American machinery.”

On March 15, Aaron travels to New York where he was hosted by Judge Mack and Felix Frankfurter. The next day the trio lunch at the Art Club in New York with Robert Bacon, former US Ambassador to France and Theodore Roosevelt, now Fellow at Harvard University. Aaron spoke for one hour and forty minutes (noting in his diary that henceforth he would be known as the man who kept the Colonel quiet for 101 minutes.) His diary records that he spoke about the importance of the Jewish presence in the Holy Land. Following the talk, Bacon invited Aaron to speak at Harvard.

Two days after Aaron dined with Roosevelt (and four days after Brandeis hosted Sokolow), Harvard law professor and Brandeis-colleague, Roscoe Pound contacts Judge Mack to discuss Aaron’s Harvard lecture. Aaron was well known to Pound (not surprisingly, since Pound’s PhD was in Botany) and Pound was looking forward to seeing him. Ultimately Aaronsohn would give two lectures in Boston.

During April while arrangements for Aaron’s speaking engagements were finalized, severe floods attacked the Midwest. As of April 6, 460 people were killed in Ohio alone and 77,000 were homeless. By this time Aaron’ reputation had exploded. He was the new go-to-expert of Secretary of the Interior, Franklin Knight Lane and they would meet on at least two occasions that month. On April 5, 1913, the New York Times reported:

Aaron Aaronsohn, head of the Jewish Agricultural Experiment Station in Palestine, conferred with Secretary Lane on means to control the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. Mr. Aaronsohn’s suggestions impressed the Secretary, who will discuss them with President Wilson.

On April 19, four days after arrangements for the Harvard meetings were completed, Aaron notifies Brandeis that he would be in Boston. Immediately on receipt of Aaron’s letter Brandeis replies, inviting Aaron to dinner. Brandeis’ letter discloses that he and Aaronsohn were already more than passing acquaintances (“My dear Mr. Aaronsohn”), but that Brandeis did not know Aaron well.

Aaron had left New York for Washington by the time Brandeis’ letter arrived, resulting in two (frantic? desperate?) telegrams plus a letter from Brandeis seeking a reply. None has
survived but the dinner did go forth on May 4. Alfred Lief noted that Charles Eliot, President-emeritus of Harvard was present and following Aaron’s presentation ‘Brandeis and his guests were beaming.’ At this dinner either Aaron delivered the same speech he would give the following day at the Menorah Society or Brandeis attended the meeting along with Eliot, who introduced Aaron. The talk was about Zionism, commitment to country and Aaron’s pride in his people. And it profoundly affecting Brandeis.

Two weeks later, on May 18, Brandeis spoke to the Chelsea (Mass.) Young Men's Hebrew Association, saying:

“A fortnight ago it was my privilege to spend the evening with one of the most interesting, brilliant and remarkable men I have ever met. He is the son of a poor Roumanian Jew who migrated from his native land thirty-two years ago to take up his residence in Palestine, the land of his fathers. The son, who is now at the head of the Jewish Agricultural Experiment Station in Palestine, is Aaron Aaronsohn. He made what is considered one of the most remarkable and useful discoveries in re-cent years, and possibly of all times. He discovered what is known as the "wild wheat" the plant which botanists, all over the world, had been trying for years to discover. There is a hope that, by reason of this discovery, the food products of the world may be immeasurably increased in quantity; that it may be possible to extend the area of wheat culture by utilizing land long believed to be unfit for wheat culture because of the lack of moisture. He told us that it was his persistent efforts to improve the fertility of Palestine which had led to the discovery of the wild wheat a discovery which has impressed the Government of the United States and which may mean much for the future of Palestine.”

The change in Brandeis since the Sokolow visit is palpable. After meeting Aaron, Brandeis’ contacts his friend Norman Hapgood, editor of Harper’s Weekly, suggesting Aaron write a piece on Zionism. Hapgood would later write that the “seed of Zionism was first sown in his [Brandeis’] mind” by Aaronsohn and the story of his wild wheat. This is confirmed by Mrs. Julius Rosenwald who “heard Brandeis say that Aaron should be partly credited for his Zionist conversion,” a view also known to Aaronsohn.  

Soon afterwards, the Maccabaean Journal reported that a new organization, the Zion Association of Greater Boston, had been formed with Brandeis as honorary president, and features an article by Aaronsohn. During the next months, Brandeis, whose “interests in Jewish national affairs increases from day to day,” continued championing Aaronsohn, but refused Sokolow’s invitation to the World Zionist Congress. Instead, he sent a strongly worded letter that he urged be read at the conference, entitled “Return to Palestine.”

The Ghost of Aaronsohn—in Brandeis’ Words

The unique Aaronsohnian-ideas which surface in Brandeis’ writings or speeches further attests to Aaronsohn’s influence. Three are set forth:

1. Aaronsohn: May 5, 1913, Lenox Hotel

“We have 150,000 Jews living in Palestine. In thirty years we have not had one single criminal case. 1800 years of persecution
did not succeed in making the Jew a gambler, a slaver, or a gunman. Why? In my opinion it is because you have destroyed by the ways of your education the attachment of the children to the parents. You have brought about estrangement between them. What is sacrilege to the parent is not sacrilege to the child. Among us in Palestine we speak the tongue sacred to our old parents, and we respect their traditions. Our parents, even if they have only a very slight knowledge of Jewish history, can learn from their children. Both parents and children venerate the same things in the Jewish past. You have not succeeded so well in this country.”

Brandeis’ YMHA speech, May 1913:

“In the Jewish colonies of Palestine there are no Jewish criminals; because everyone, old and young alike, is led to feel the glory of his people and his obligation to carry forward its ideals. The new Palestinian Jewry produces instead of criminals, scientists like Aaron Aaronsohn, the discoverer of wild wheat; …”164, 165.

2. Aaronsohn March 6, 1913 speech at the Chicago Club:166

“The Jews are often reproached for being too Cosmopolitan, In Palestine we take an altogether different approach from the attitude of most of our brethren the world over. We admit that some of the reproaches laid to us are well founded; we admit that the Jew in fact has certain characteristics of his own' he has a mentality that is different from his neighbors; he has a psychology different to a certain extent we admit that there is a certain Jewish segregation, caused by discrimination against our race.”

Brandeis 1915 “The Jewish Problem and How to Solve It,”

“Common race is only one of the elements which determine nationality. Conscious community of sentiments, common experiences, and common qualities are equally, perhaps more, important…. The segregation of the Jew was so general, so complete, and so long continued as to intensify our "peculiarities" and make them almost ineradicable.”

Aaronsohn: (Chicago City Club)

“But instead of taking offense and carrying it passively as a burden, we try to develop these peculiarities and properties to their highest efficiency, because we believe that in bringing out in every individual or in every race to the highest possible degree, worthy qualities and attributes, we make the individuals and the race better and the world richer.”
Brandeis (continuing):

“We recognize that with each child the aim of education should be to develop his own individuality, not to make him an imitator, not to assimilate him to others. … And what people in the world have shown greater individuality than the Jews? Has any a nobler past? Does any possess common ideas better worth expressing? Have any marked traits worthier of development?”

**The Zionist Imperative as the Predicate for Immigration**

Many scholars attribute the burgeoning of Zionism to outbreak of war. This was not the Aaronsohn view. As his sister, Rivka, wrote in “the Young Judean” the first wave of Aliyah (of which her parents were members) preceded the war by almost a quarter of a century: “

“The immigrants,” Brandeis concurred.167 “came from countries where Jews were persecuted and subjected to the greatest injustice, but the desire to avoid injustice was not the main cause of their settling in Palestine. They went to Palestine because they were convinced that the underlying longing of Jews for Palestine was a fact of deepest significance.”168

Three years earlier Brandeis heard Aaronsohn articulate the same ideal:

‘First, why did they go to Palestine? You will hear from many sides that it was because they had to suffer from persecution in the countries where they were. But there was no more persecution, nor worse, in 1882 than before. They were not driven by outside forces, but it was the revival of the old Jewish loyalty and hopes that the Jewish race would be restored in Palestine... But the Jewish masses,... when they express a longing to go to Zion do not mean any spiritual thing but a geographical place. That was the sentiment that drove the young men to go to Palestine.’169

If there remains doubt as to Brandeis’ conversion, the influence on his daughter, Elizabeth, is clear, at least according to Ruth Mack. That honor belongs to Aaron’s sister, Rifka, who travelled with Aaron (Brandeis’ and Frankfurter’s letters note her involvement with affection).170

“In June 1914 [Brandeis] was an unknown factor in Jewry, one whose Jewish affiliations had been doubted in 1913” with “Brandeis’ adhesion to the Zionist movement [first] announced in 1913.”171 On August 20th, 1914, one year and four months after his first Zionist speech, Brandeis was elected provisional President of the Executive Committee for General Zionist affairs of The Zionist Organization of America.172, 173
Aaron Onwards

A cable Brandeis sent Frankfurter (November 22, 1917) on learning of the signing of the Balfour Declaration acknowledges his and Weizmann’s efforts -- but notes Aaronsohn’s importance: “the Declaration “is sending the Message Aronson [sic] has started for Zionist work.” And if Brandeis thought highly of Aaron, the feeling was mutual. On November 26, 1917, Aaron writes his brother that his “last trip to the U.S. was unusually productive. It has brought about the closest collaboration with LDB, who is ‘really head and shoulders above everyone else,’ He is great. He is a statesman....and [Brandeis] discovered that I have character and judgment and wisdom, the three things he appreciates most. You cannot imagine how happy little Felix- who is a dear- felt when LDB told him that. Of course much was due to paving the way [by] Felix.”

Aaronsohn’s Influence

The appearance of Aaronsohn on the event-horizon of Justice Brandeis was more than providential. A proponent of science to advance humanity through law and policy, Brandeis was beginning to resurrect his Jewish Identity just as Jews of German heritage were burying or expunging theirs. To be proud to be a Jew- to eschew the assimilative process of hiding their shameful roots –appears to be Brandeis’ quest. But Brandeis was still questioning the meaning and purpose of Jewishness in contemporary society.

To Brandeis, Aaronsohn epitomized the answer. Noting that Aaronsohn was “one of the most interesting, brilliant and remarkable men,” along with pedagogue David Yellin, and Boris Schatz, founder of the Bezalel Art School (who he learned of from Aaronsohn), made Brandeis proud of his heritage, of what it meant to be a Jew. These men embodied the marriage of idealism and pragmatism–Brandeis’ mantra.

Searching to manifest his newly found Jewishness, Brandeis encountered restrictions imposed by his upbringing: His Jewishness had to be far removed from the “Shtetl variety” from which his ancestors fled. If he could not become Orthodox like Uncle Louis, perhaps Zionism was an alternative? Brandeis seemed to think so: "... Zionism [comes] 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.”

In Zionism Brandeis found his raison d’etre: “noting that, on the whole, it was the most worthwhile of all his endeavors.” But before Brandeis could embrace Zionism, he needed to extricate himself from the taint of disloyalty to his family’s country. Indeed, Brandeis wrote that “during most of my life my contact with Jews and Judaism was slight and I gave little though to their problems, save by asking myself whether we were showing in our lives due
appreciation which this hospitable country affords. ... In the minds of successful immigrants America was a refuge and land of opportunity; infidelity to the land that provided suffrage was treason. To assuage these misgivings, Brandeis’ formulation of Zionism required a synthesis of Zionism with American allegiance. “To be a good American we must be better Jews and to be better Jews, we must be Zionists.”” i.e. “Zionism through Americanism.”

To Brandeis, Aaronsohn evidenced the perfection of Creation– the amalgam of the altruistic scientist and committed Jew – the objectives being one and the same; to advance humanity. “Brandeis was won over by Aaronsohn’s descriptions of Jewish Palestine, which appeared to embody the attributes he so admired- democracy, morality, experimentation, industry and smallness…. ‘Zionism is the Pilgrim inspiration over again; the descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers should not find it hard to understand and sympathize with it.”

Aaronsohn’s scientific achievements coupled with his love of Israel defied Brandeis to emulate him – to become a living example of someone who could both demonstrate his Jewishness and be a prime mover in modern society. Aaronsohn taught Brandeis what it meant to be a Jew. And, if deHaas re-invigorated the connection with Uncle Louis, I suggest only Aaron Aaronsohn could demonstrate to Brandeis what it meant to be a better Jew.

Post script

On learning of Aaron’s death, Felix Frankfurter wrote a note to Rifka:.

“Some day in some ordinary [way] an adequate word will be said for Aaron. It will take much time and many minds to do justice to the universality of his mind, the romance of his achievements and the abounding richness and greatness of his character. ...”

Acknowledgements:
The author acknowledges, with gratitude comments and advice of: Dr. Norman A Bailey, Professor Jonathan Sarna and Professor Jehuda Reinharz. Esther Dekel, Director of the Bet Aaronsohn Museum, Zichron Yaakov, Israel, Marion Freudental, Chief Archivist, and Ilanit Levi, Senior Researcher, facilitated and assisted in retrieving archived documents. All references to Aaronsohn Archives are found in the Bet Aaronsohn Museum, Zichron Yaakov Israel. The author bears full responsibility for the contents of this paper.

About the Author

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5 Brandeis to Bernard Gerson Richards, February 2, 1911.


12“His mother ... “encouraged her children to value ethical teachings of religion, including Judaism, while eschewing the age-old rituals.” *Louis Brandeis & Jacob Frank, Frankists Today*, Musings of a Jewish Bookseller (November, 2102). http://judaicaused.blogspot.co.il/2012/11/louis-brandeis-jacob-frank_4530.html


15 DeHaas, *LOUIS D. BRANDEIS*, A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH With Special Reference to his Contributions to JEWISH AND ZIONIST HISTORY With full text of his Addresses delivered from 1912 to 1924, BLOCK PUBLISHING COMPANY (NEW YORK, 1929). [sic]


18 Sarna, *Louis D. Brandeis: Zionist Leader*.


21 DeHaas, *Louis D. Brandeis, A Biographical Sketch*.


Sarna, The Jewish Legacy of Louis D. Brandeis.

Brandeis, Zionism and Patriotism.

“When he applied for membership in the American Jewish Committee in 1907 Brandeis was rejected because, he [had] not identified himself with Jewish Affairs and is rather inclined to side with the Ethical Culturists.” Sarna, The Jewish Legacy of Louis D. Brandeis. A few years later, he was sent the application but never returned it.


Gurock, American Zionism: Mission and Politics.

Brandeis letters, University of Louisville, Kentucky, Reel 26 Nutter, McClennen & Fish, (1911-1912).


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NOVEMBER 13, 1931, Jewish News.


39 ibid.


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42 deHaas, *Louis D. Brandeis, A Biographical Sketch*.


47 deHaas, *Louis D. Brandeis, A Biographical Sketch*.

48 http://ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/1942_1943_3_SpecialArticles.pdf

49 The Jewish Sentinel, (April, 1913), http://www.idaillinois.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p16614coll14/id/38/rec/50

50 Grose, *Louis Brandeis, Arthur Balfour and a Declaration that Made History*.

51 The MA(\5AEAN (April, 1913) [sic] http://archive.org/stream/no4maccabaean23zionuoft/no4maccabaean23zionuoft_djvu.txt

52 Louis E. Leventhal, *Louis Dembitz Brandeis*. 

54 De Haas, Louis D. Brandeis, A Biographical Sketch.

55 Harry Friedenwald, MD was also a scholar of the history of medicine and medicinal plants. http://jewishmuseummd.org/tag/harry-friedenwald/ 

56 Letter from Bernard Rosenblatt to AA (April 15, 1913) Aaronsohn Archives.


58 Sarna pointedly asks: “The fact that someone with this highly assimilated background came to be seen as a Jewish prophet-not just an ordinary hero but an object in some circles of profoundly religious veneration-cries out for explanation.” Sarna, Louis D. Brandeis: Zionist Leader, 349.


60 ibid.


66 Aaron Aaronsohn, Herzl Museum.


Aaronsohn letter to Mrs. Augusta Rosenwald, 1913, Aaronsohn Archives.


Aaronsohn archives. They were introduced in 1907 by Schweinfurth who sent Fairchild an Aaronsohn article published in Altneuland.


Posner, “The spy from Palestine.”
80 Katz, *The Aaronsohn Saga*.

81 Urofsky, *Brandeis Letters*.


89 RICHARD V. OULAHAN , “AARON AARONSOHN KILLED.; Agricultural Expert Drops with Airplane in London-Paris Flight,” Special Cable to THE NEW YORK TIMES, (May 19, 1919) 14.

90 The New York Times called Aaronsohn, “one of the world’s most notable agricultural experts” (May 19, 1919).

91 “Felix Frankfurter , Supreme Court, (Washington, October 22, 1960). To Professor Fein. Deeming Aaron Aaronsohn one of the most creative minds I ever encountered and deeply cherishing his memory as a dear friend….."


93 David Fairchild, *Journal of Heredity*. 

95 AARON AARONSOHN, “AGRICULTURAL AND BOTANICAL EXPLORATIONS IN PALESTINE”


104 “Julius Rosenwald Papers,” The University of Chicago Library.


108 Anna Loeb writes Alexander Aaronsohn (March 28, 1913),” JR [Rosenwald] sent a letter to me to read from Louis Marshall which was really beautiful as much as he lauded Aaron to the skies. He said some very wonderful things about your brother, things to be proud of. It makes me very happy. It was nice of JR to send me the letter to read and I did appreciate it.” Aaronsohn Archives.

109 Aaron’s brother, Alexander, refused to declare himself a Zionist, defiantly objecting to a call by Justice Brandeis to do so.


111 David Fairchild, “An American Research Institution in Palestine. The Jewish Agricultural Experiment Station at Haifa,”


116 Beginning in 1890, Mack became active in the Zionist Movement. Walter Roth, “Judge Julian W. Mack: The Court and the Community.”
By 1917, Frankfurter signing his letters to Aaron “Affectionately, Felix (Dec 5, 1917) or stronger: On Jan 13, 1918 Frankfurter writes to Aaron: Please return to Washington at once to take advantage of important opportunity, Love, Felix.”

Aaronsohn Archives, (October, 1916).

Letters of Rivka Aaronsohn, Aaronsohn archives.


Julian Mack papers, Zion Archves New York.

CYRUS ADLER Jacob Schiff, A Biographical Sketch
http://www.ajcarchive.org/AJC_DATA/Files/1921_1922_3_SpecialArticles.pdf.

Walter Roth, Judge Julian W. Mack:, The Court and the Community

A. Aaronsohn, AGRICULTURAL AND BOTANICAL EXPLORATIONS IN PALESTINE

Ibid.


Ibid.

Aaronsohn, Aaron, AGRICULTURAL AND BOTANICAL EXPLORATIONS IN PALESTINE


R Chodat, “A Grain of Wheat”

William E Smythe set up the Little Landers operations in the U.S. and proposed something similar in Palestine, writes Aaron he is sending his proposal to Brandeis and that “I got more out of you with regard to encouragement than any other who visited us ….”

On January 27, 1913 Aaron gives a lecture at a Hadassah forum in New York.

Walter Roth, “Looking backward : True Stories from Chicago's Jewish History,”.

The Cincinnati Enquirer, (January 6, 1913) 5.

James Angell to Rosenwald: “I wish to express my appreciation at the unusual privilege of hearing Mr Aaronsohn at lunch yesterday. His talk was the most illuminating and informative that I have heard in many a long day.” Aaronsohn Archives (January, 1912).

Interspace News, (Chicago, January 8, 1913).

Aaron Aaronsohn, “The discovery of wild wheat and its bearing on the Development of a Drought Resistant Race” Sigma Xi Quarterly, (March 6, 1913).


http://archive.org/stream/no5maccabaeanc23zionuoft/no5maccabaeanc23zionuoft_djvu.txt


Cyrus Adler, January 16, 1913 to Judge Mack, Aaronsohn Archives, Bet Aaronsohn.

Aaron Aaronsohn, Sigma Xi Quarterly (March 6, 1913).

http://www.worldcat.org/search?q=kw%3A%22


Between 1910 and 1912 Aaronson garnered at least 80 articles in the American press.

Proceedings of the PSO, New Series No. 28

117. New York Times, Feb 9, 1913

LOOKING FOR THE “MISSING LINK” IN WHEAT EVOLUTION

After Years of Careful Search Aaron Aaronsohn Discovers a Plant in the Wilds of Palestine That Has Been Long Foreshadowed by Scientists and That May Prove an Inestimable Blessing to Mankind.

148 Diary of Aaron Aaronsohn, Aaronsohn Archives.


151 “454 Dead in Ohio Flood, 77,133 are Homeless” [Secretary of the Interior] “Lane Suggests Federal Control of Flood Waters,” The Inter Ocean (Chicago, Illinois) (: 6 April 1913) 2

152 On April 19 Aaron was notified the Botany Department lecture would take place May 5 at 4pm at the Botanical Museum, the Menorah Society lecture was given that evening.

153 Alfred Lief writes Charles Crane took Brandeis to a lecture in Chicago in 1912 where he met Aaron. Alfred Lief, Brandeis; the Personal History of an American Ideal. Stackpole Sons (New York,:), 1936.) Aaron did not arrive in the United States until the end of 1912. For the remainder of the year he remained on the West Coast, arriving in Chicago on January 2, 1913. Aaron did lecture in Chicago in 1913, in January and March. Aaronsohn’s diary (Aaronsohn Archives)

154 The April 21 letter contains ‘B”H’, an acronym for Baruch Hashem, used by religious Jews to acknowledge the Creator. Presumably, Brandeis used it out of respect –assuming Aaronsohn’s religious practice. Had Brandeis known Aaronsohn well, he would have realized Aaronsohn was not religious.


156 The MENORAH ASSOCIATION AND MENORAH JOURNAL, 1913


Aaronsohn Archives.

Vol. 23 no 5. https://archive.org/details/no5maccabaean23zionuoft


Louis E. Levinthal, *Louis Dembitz Brandeis*.


Aaronsohn archives.

Brandeis, *Zionism and Patriotism*.


When Judge Mack received a contribution for the Palestine Restoration Commission from Elizabeth [Brandeis], he wrote his daughter, Ruth “It appears Elizabeth is becoming a Zionist.” When Ruth reported this to Elizabeth, her response was “What! Doesn’t he know I’ve been one for ages?”: Ruth writes Aaron March 3, 1918, “I think Oobi did that.” [Oobi was Rifka’s nick-name]. Aaronsohn Archives.

*The Jewish Sentinel of Chicago*, 33 (02) (1919). http://www.idaillinois.org/cdm/search/collection/p16614coll14/searchterm/The%20Sentinel%20of%20Chicago%20vol%2033%20no%202%20%281919%29%20Field%20of%20View%20Page%202%20%20%20%20%20/0
Josef Fraenkel “Patriot, Judge, and Zionist”


Mrs. Rosenwald writes Aaron on route asking if “visiting Palestine will turn her into a Zionist?”

Western Union Telegram from Brandeis to Frankfurter (November 22, 1917) Aaronsohn Archives, Bet Aaronsohn Museum, Zichron Yaakov, Israel.

The verse was in Hebrew, translated by the author.

Aaronsohn Archives.


Katz, The Aaronsohn Saga 109, quoting Brandeis’ Chelsea Speech on May 18, 1918 reported in the Maccabean.


Sarah Schmidt, Horace Kallen and the Americanization of Zionism.


http://www.cojs.org/AJH/flashpaper/america/13-a.swf

http://www.brandeis.edu/hornstein/sarna/reviewessays/Archive/TheFamilyLettersofLouisDBrandeisReview.pdf

Louis Dembitz Brandeis, Zionism and Patriotism.