This chapter studies the dialectical tension between Judaism and Zionism. How did Zionism mould perceptions and images that were formed in the Jewish past, and to what extent were these Jewish themes reflected, modified and crystallized in the national culture of the State of Israel? This study brings up constituent topics such as messianism, utopianism, memory, territorialism, along with the critics that threatened to undermine the Zionist appropriations and constructs. Thus, in addition to concrete utopian plans and redemptionist territorial views, this study discusses the fundamental critiques of messianism penned by Gershom Scholem and Jacob Talmon and the non-territorial perceptions of the Levant by the essayist Jacqueline Kahanoff. This study ends with the nationalization of the Negev (Israel’s desert), the vision of the “old man” who proclaimed statehood in 1948, as shown by David Ben-Gurion’s funeral and the symbolic memory of his grave in the desert. In its attempt to acquire historical legitimation, Zionism appropriated themes and myths from the Jewish past, yet, these appropriations were modified as they selectively culled elements that suited the national allegory. This study opens with Ben-Gurion’s messianic vision and comes full circle with his death in 1973, thereby framing the question of how Judaism was nationalized.

The nationalization of Judaism took many different forms, beginning with the nationalization of messianism by Theodor Herzl, the founder of the World Zionist Organization, and David Ben-Gurion’s founding of the State of Israel. This includes the nationalization of utopia as seen in the Million Plan; the nationalization of the basic themes of the Jewish religion such as the sacrifice of Isaac, the collective adoption of figures like Nimrod, the upgrading of national figures like Herod; and the nationalization of the land by the devotees of the Greater Land of Israel and their supporters in the Israeli academic world since 1967. This nationalizing tendency was criticized by Scholem and Talmon, who wished to disassemble the national-messianic synthesis that had been present from Ben-Gurion (in its secular form) to the national-religious movement Gush Emunim. Parallel with the radical nationalism of the “hills” of Judea and Samaria, a more conciliatory form of nationalism was proposed: that of the “sea” (the Mediterranean Option) and of the “desert” (“Going south” to paraphrase Fredrick Turner’s (1983) thesis), both of which were antithetical to the integral nationalism.

The question underlying this study is, did the Zionist movement and the State of Israel wish to create something new in history or did they wish to create a stepping-stone to normality? This question is connected with the model presented by the two founding fathers, the “Jewish
Prometheuses,” Herzl and Ben-Gurion, who were involved in messianism, which was and still is the basic question with regard to Zionism and Israel. What kind of messianism did they want? Was it an apocalyptic messianism that envisaged the creation of a new world and a new species, or (as it is more reasonable to suppose) a Maimonides-type messianism in which the world would carry on as usual in the days of the Messiah (for if there is no subjugation of the Jews by others, there is no difference between the moulding of time and working on normal life (Schulte, 2015, 79–97))? In other words, what type of redemption did Zionism have in mind: the type of the Messiah, son of David or the type of the Messiah, son of Joseph?

The founder of the Jewish state wrote about the prophet of the Jewish state: “Herzl was indeed like a Messiah since he galvanized the feeling of the youth that Eretz Israel was achievable” (Ben-Gurion, 1970, 43). Herzl had sketched quite an elaborate plan for a state in his book The Jewish State (Der Judenstaat, 1896) and added details in his utopian novel Altneuland (Old-New Land, 1902). Already in his appearance at the First Zionist Congress, Herzl was described as a Messiah by the Zionist Jewish journalist Mordechai Ben-Ami: “It was as if the Messiah, the son of David, stood before us” (Ben-Ami, 1914, 692). Two years earlier, Dr Reuben Bierer had informed Herzl that the Chief Rabbi of Sofia considered him to be the Messiah (Lowental, 1958). The Reverend William Hechler, a committed Christian Zionist, believed it was God’s will that he was “in a position which enabled me to bring to the attention of certain people of importance the messianic vision of the Jewish leader” (Hertzberg, 1973, 46). The same position was held by the historian Robert Wistrich, who thought that “it is difficult to avoid the feeling that Herzl’s intense sense of Zionist mission did have some latent messianic features, even though he never spoke publicly in this vein” (Wistrich, 1999, 321–338). Herzl’s self-testimony could be said to confirm, to a certain extent, the position of these two historians. His self-testimony was described by the author Reuben Brainin as follows: at the age of twelve, he dreamt a “wonderful dream” about being like Moses, the “King Messiah” (Brainin, 1919, 17–18).

Nevertheless, Herzl’s vision was, as a matter of fact, a program of political imagination. In the context of the Jewish condition in the late 19th century, Herzl’s political utopia was important because it enabled Jews to start viewing the idea of a Jewish state as feasible and doable. Ben-Gurion, no doubt, continued Herzl’s vision but shifted it onto a much more concrete and realistic path: a detailed and concrete plan concerning various operational aspects of the envisioned Jewish state, aspects that would materialize in one way or another after the establishment of the State of Israel. The political revolutionary spirit which prevails in Herzl’s writings was transformed into an almost-real state plan by David Ben-Gurion.

The Zionist utopias, including concrete utopias such as the 1942 Million Plan, belong to a long utopian tradition in Western intellectual history going back to the beginning of the modern era. As a secular messianic movement, Promethean and modern in nature, Zionism rebelled against religious messianism and was attracted to utopianism (Elboim-Dror, 1993). The history of the messianic idea in Zionism is umbilically linked to the various attempts to create Zionist utopias. The early utopian tendencies in Judaism, which moulded Western culture, were an inspiration for modern Zionism. The Zionist utopias, each of which dreamt in its own way of the future character of a Jewish state, although closely connected to the messianic vision, which was generally passive, proposed concrete plans of action within a historical reality. An outstanding example of the nationalization of the utopian idea was Ben-Gurion’s Million Plan.

Israel’s first prime minister’s plan for a fast mass Jewish immigration to Palestine during World War II envisioned an imaginary transfer of a million Jews to Palestine in a year and a
The Million Plan was formulated with the help of a big team of experts, professionals and scientists in what is known as the Planning Committee. The aim of this study is to present three new approaches. First, the analysis of the Million Plan from several interconnected perspectives will start by viewing the event as marking the beginning of the establishment of a new socio-political order, which Zionist historiography calls *mamlakhtiyut* (Statism or Etatism), usually linked to the establishment of Israel a few years later. Second, it will explain the event as a new stage in the relationship between the political and professional-scientific establishments in the Zionist movement. Third, it will mark the Million Plan as representing a new phase in the development of David Ben-Gurion's political theology and a further fusion of his political and theological visions. The Million Plan is a pivotal event in “imagining” the Jewish state and in secularizing the theological concept of messianism as a “site of fusion” in which the political and the theological were fused through the introduction of modern science and technology. As in the case of other ideological revolutionaries in the 20th century, Ben-Gurion’s political theology and his attraction for social engineering went hand in hand (Barell, 2014). In the revolutionary Million Plan – which was formulated five years before the establishment of the State of Israel – one can trace elements of Ben-Gurion’s modernistic and technological outlook and his secular messianism, which was the core of his political theology.

Beyond the messianic myth, myths can simultaneously perform many functions. They may indeed provide legitimation for existing social and political practices, for a dominant elite, social group or national ideology. Most myths are, to some degree, narratives which seek to anchor the present in the past – and the Zionist myths do not differ from this pattern. Myths seen in this light, as a special kind of narrative, as symbolic statements or frames of reference which give meaning to the past, are not necessarily false or harmful examples of pseudo-history. Their true significance more often lies in what they can tell us about the ways in which a particular nation, political group or set of individuals seek to organize its collective memory and to establish a distinctive identity. One of the chief Jewish (and universal) themes in Israeli culture is the myth of the sacrifice of Isaac. Here we shall use the transformation of that story in Israeli culture and politics as a case study for the nationalization of Judaism.

**The nationalization of the Akkedah**

The Jewish theme of the Akkedah, which is biblical and religious in its origins, has found expression in Israeli poetry and art, which is predominantly modern and secular. Ruth Kartun-Blum, a Hebrew poetry scholar, has concluded from her research into the treatment of the Akkedah in modern Hebrew poetry that “modern Israeli writers have increasingly rediscovered the ambivalence of Jewish existence and the enormous complexity of Jewish identity. The condition of the Jews may have changed, but not the Jewish condition” (Kartun-Blum, 1995, 201), and with regard to Israeli art, the cultural critic Gideon Ofrat writes,

> The story of the Akkedah in Israeli art is a story in itself. Among us, the Akkedah has become a national symbol representing the tragedy of the fate of the Jewish people in general and the fate of our sons in particular. Very often, the Abrahams are bereaved parents and the Isaacs are the fallen.

*(Ofrat, 1996, 315–323)*

Ofrat enumerated four stages in the genealogy of the Akkedah in Israeli art. In the 1920s, it was pogroms and acts of terrorism; in the Holocaust and the War of Independence, the figure of the
bereaved father Abraham, the personification of the suffering people, came to the fore; between the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War, the ram was seen as representing hope for the future or disappointment that redemption was so long in coming; and in the first war in Lebanon, one saw the younger generation’s criticism of their leaders (identified with Abraham), who sent the young people (identified with Isaac), to be sacrificed in the war.

In the period of pioneering and settlement in Eretz Yisrael, the poems about the Akkedah (for example, in the poetry of the Third Aliyah) expressed the collective experience of a shared fate and a mystical sense of the Jewish destiny. The secularization of Hebrew culture, first in the Jewish cultural revival at the fin de siècle in Europe, and then in the first waves of immigration to Palestine, nationalized the story of the Akkedah and changed the emphasis from a relationship to a God who gave orders to the relationship between history, or the state, and the Israeli citizen, and finally to a person’s relationship to himself.

Natan Alterman, who wrote the poem “On the Boy Abraham,” at the height of the Holocaust, related to the Akkedah by describing the boy Abraham looking at his mother and seeing a knife stuck in her heart, “Mummy, mummy / I won’t sleep in bed like other boys / because I saw you in bed / Mummy, mummy, you were sleeping – with a knife in your heart.”

Following the slaughter of his parents, the boy Abraham hid in the room under the stairs. In the poem, Alterman replaced the name “Isaac” with the name of “Abraham,” who foresaw his sacrifice, which was the path to redemption. This was a clear reference to the development of the nation from the Holocaust to resurrection, the change from the passive generation slaughtered in exile to one that began to be responsible for its life in Israel (Laor, 2013, 264–308). Chaim Guri, a representative of the “Palmach generation,” the first generation of the State of Israel, “corresponded” with Alterman in his poem “Yerushah” (Inheritance): “Isaac, as the story goes, was not sacrificed… / But he bequeathed that hour to his offspring. / They are born / With a knife in their hearts” (Guri, 1972, 28).

Isaac, the young fighter, sacrificed himself in the War of Independence, and his father identified himself with the generation of the sons. Likewise, in the poetry of Amir Gilboa, also of that generation, Abraham feels himself to be sacrificed: “It’s me who is slaughtered, my son, and my blood is already on the leaves.” The secular national history inherited the Jewish religion, and this was expressed by passing the torch of the Akkedah from the father to his son in the State of Israel. This was no longer the ultimate test of faith in God as seen by Søren Kierkegaard but a continuing national credo that was a test of belonging to the state and authentic commitment to the country. The test was now in participation in Israel’s wars and was not on the metaphorical Jewish Mount Moriah. This time, the Akkedah did not conclude with a “happy end” but with offering the son as a sacrifice to the national Moloch.

Someone who criticized the Akkedah in 1948 was the writer S. Yizhar, who said in his book Yemei Ziklag (Days of Ziklag):

I hate our father Abraham who went to sacrifice Isaac. What right did he have to do this to Isaac? He should have sacrificed himself! I hate God who sent him to do this sacrifice and closed off all his options and only opened up the way to the Akkedah. I hate God because Isaac was only material for an experiment between Abraham and his God.

(Smilansky, 1958)

After the War of Independence, the subject of the national Akkedah underwent a process of individualization and gained a psychological significance relating to the private person. An
example is T. Carmi’s poem “Isaac’s Fear,” which serves as a bridge between the “Palmach generation” and the “generation of the state”:

Last night I dreamt that my son did not return. / He came to me and said: / When I was little and you were, / You would not tell me / The story of the binding of Isaac, / To frighten me with the knife, fire, and ram,

(Carmi, 1968, 46)

The commanding God is replaced by a woman who gives orders, a beloved woman who takes the father away from his son. The fear of betrayal, a basic human fear, also becomes Abraham’s fear, and that is the main subject of the poem. Here we see a sacrifice of the father and the son by the woman. Here there is also an actualization of the Bible into Israeli daily life, and the poet quite naturally uses materials from Jewish tradition in order to express his private feelings.

Other Israeli poets, apart from Alterman, Guri, Binjamin Galai and Carmi, such as A. Hillel, Yehiel Mar and Tuvia Rubner, continue to adapt the Jewish material of the Akkedah to the contemporary Israeli reality. Tuvia Rubner, in his poem “Voices,” stresses the motif of continuity, as if the Akkedah was a prolonged internal process without any mobilizing significance and without any drama. It represents the existentialist phase of a modern secular Israeli trapped in cyclical time, that makes use of the only dialogue that takes place between Abraham and Isaac. Instead of God and Abraham, the heroes of the Jewish myth, Rubner focuses on the relationship of father and son, but this is not a metaphysical father but the actual father, Abraham.

The subject of the sacrifice became a major issue in the plastic arts from the beginning of the 1940s, and this was very much due to the influence of the sculpture of Yitzhak Danziger. Two of his pupils, Mordechai Gumpel and Kosso Elul, have said that their teacher called one of his sculptures “The Sacrifice of Isaac.” The scholar Tamar Manor thinks that

the idea of the sacrifice of Isaac also occurred to Danziger in connection with the sacrifice of the fighters that preoccupied him in those years…Danziger chose the sacrifice of the ram as a symbol of the sacrifice of the fallen. The title “Sacrifice of Isaac” reveals a conscious connection between the sacrifice and the Jewish-national myth of sacrifice and redemption.

(Manor-Friedman, 1996)

Examples of paintings of the Akkedah in the period of the War of Independence are Moshe Tamir’s works “Ram” (1949) and “Sacrifice” (1951), in which the ram resembles one of the fighters.

At the same time, secular Israeli culture also contemplated the parallel between the Akkedah and the crucifixion. This parallel was present in the paintings of the ewe-lamb by Menashe Kadishman, in the inclusion of Mary in the painting of the Akkedah by Shmuel Bonneh, in the paintings of the Pietà by Naftali Bezem, in the drawings of Shoshana Heimann and in the “Paintings of the Mother” by Avraham Ofek. While in the plastic arts, there was a tendency to identify the Akkedah with the crucifixion, Hebrew poetry avoided this analogy. The reason for this was perhaps that plastic art was regarded as a “foreign implant,” universalistic and non-Jewish, while poetry was different in being connected with the national language, Hebrew.

In the Six-Day War in 1967, the myth of the Akkedah was again prominent. Shraga Weill of Kibbutz Ha-Ogen, who lost a son, made a series of seven prints of the Akkedah that were personal in nature and non-theological. In the triptych he painted five years later, he did not depict the tragic event itself. Yigal Mossinson also lost a son in the war, and in his play Shimshon (1968),
the father asked, “Why your only son? Why your son whom you love? Aren’t we deceiving ourselves and Isaac whom we bring every day to sacrifice?” In the War of Attrition, which took place for three years after 1967, the poet Eli Alon protested: “When Abraham received the order, he knew there would be a miracle…but today, what belief do we have?” In the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Shmuel Bonneh painted Abraham clad in armour, and the angel and the ram are absent from the picture. Bonneh related: “After the Yom Kippur War, the idea of a story came to me, in which father Abraham was in battledress on the battlefield and tried to bring healing to the wounded soldiers” (cited in Offrat, 2011). One may recall that according to Jewish tradition, the original Akkedah took place at dusk on Yom Kippur. In connection with this, the Akkedah paintings by Shmuel Bak, Naftali Bezem and Mordechai Ardon are particularly noteworthy. In the catalogue of the exhibition “Jewish Experience in the Art of the Twentieth Century,” Avram Kampf wrote: “The struggle for existence brought the reality of the ancient myth of the Akkedah to the knowledge of the Jews of our time.”

Yigal Tumarkin is known from his paintings in the 1980s to be an artist particularly critical of the Akkedah. In his opinion, God went from his role of being a redeemer to being a slayer. The artist, who maintained that the function of art was to smash idols and destroy myths, was very preoccupied in his works with the Akkedah and the crucifixion. His sculptures, which protested against the empathy for the Akkedah myth of the artists and poets of 1948, represented the anguish of the victim, his rebellion against the Israeli destiny involving endless war. Another well-known slayer of sacred cows is Uri Lipschitz, who made four etchings on the subject of the Akkedah. He summarized his work as follows: “In fact, every one of my paintings is the Akkedah.”

The normality of Israeli daily life replaced memories of the Holocaust and the wars, and the subject of the Akkedah underwent a linguistic transformation through being assimilated into the spoken tongue. Israeli Hebrew gradually began to succeed biblical Hebrew. An example of this is a poem by David Avidan ridiculing the mythology both of the Akkedah and the crucifixion by making the sacred texts into a musical: “The binding of Isaac / a diversionary action, / early ignition. / The crucifixion, / a dress rehearsal / late ignition. / Musical version” (Avidan, 1964, 25).

In his de-mythologization of the Christian interpretation of the Akkedah, Avidan, in his terse way, criticizes the idea of the Akkedah as a prefiguration of the crucifixion. Here the Akkedah is a rehearsal for the crucifixion in the musical, and this time Jesus is a double of Isaac. Likewise, Meir Wieseltier, in his poem “A Story About Isaac,” made a de-mythologization of the Akkedah. They were joined by Avot Yeshurun: “We have a problem of a Sacrifice of Isaac. For us it comes out as a father has mercy on children. For you it comes out as a father has mercy on himself.”

The next stage in the Israelization of the Akkedah was irony and de-mystification, as, for instance, in Yehuda Amichai’s poem, “The True Hero of the Akkedah,” “The true hero of the binding is the ram / Who didn’t know about the other people’s conspiracy. / He sort of volunteered to die in Isaac’s place. / I want to sing a song in his memory” (Amichai, 1971, 21).

Amichai’s intention was to show that the whole thing was a fraud and that the only victim of the Akkedah was the ram, from whose horns shofars were made. As one may recall, at Rosh Hashana, the blowing of the shofar is associated with the ram which was sacrificed, a reminder of God’s promise and of the people that were sacrificed throughout history as part of the process of redemption. Amichai laughs at the transcendental and brings it down to the level of the everyday, and out of a tradition he makes a conspiracy. In this Bakhtinian carnival in which the heroes of the Akkedah play their parts, the only victim is the ram.

The climax of bitter protestation at the sacrifice of the sons in the State of Israel is to be found in Hanoch Levine’s poem in his play Malkat Ha-ambatia (The Queen of the Bathtub): “My dear father, when you’re standing at my graveside / Old and very solitary / And you see how they inter my body in the dust, / Just ask my forgiveness, father” (Levine, 1987, 92).
The son who demands a stock-taking from his father derides the national rhetoric by asking the father to recognize his responsibility for the death of his son. This scene in which the son speaks to his old and weary father from the depths of the grave is perhaps the most tragic in the Hebrew poetry about the Akkedah. Another playwright, Avraham Raz, turns the tale of the Akkedah on its head in his play, *Israel Shefi's Independence Night* (1969), by showing Isaac sacrificing Abraham.

Following the war in Lebanon in 1982, the artists again dealt with the Akkedah, and the best-known amongst them is Menashe Kadishman. He created a real grave in order to contrast it with a lamb, an innocent victim, which is not so different from a ram. In the exhibition “Catastrophe,” given in the Jerusalem Theatre in 1984, he made a painting called “Akkedah” on a canvas four-and-a-half-metres long in which a lamb is depicted next to a dog preying on a corpse. A year later, as a reaction to his son’s conscription into the army, he exhibited a sculpture entitled “The Sacrifice of Isaac” in the Jewish Museum in New York (it was later moved to the forecourt of the Tel Aviv Museum). This sculpture, constructed of Cor-Ten steel, was in the form of a ram’s head, the head of the victimized son and a wailing woman. The artist Motti Mizrachi reacted to the war by presenting sketches in a work called “The Opera,” which he produced together with the composer Arik Shapira. Mizrachi, who created a theatrical display of puppets, spoke with the voice of the sacrificed: “We the sacrificed don’t ask, don’t hesitate and don’t retreat. Our mouths are full of song!”

Parallel with the identification with the myth of the Akkedah both in Israel’s wars and in the non-heroic operations carried out by Israel at the beginning of the 20th century, satire continued to undermine the myth as if to demonstrate the vitality and normality of Israeli culture. The Akkedah featured in two television programs: in *Ha-hamisha ha-camerit* in the 1990s and *Ha-yehudim ba'im* in 2014. In the first program, a moment before Abraham intended to knife his son, he heard a commanding voice declaring, “Abraham, lay not thine hand upon the lad.” Suddenly, a corpulent man wearing a skullcap appeared on the scene, a well-known Israeli film star who specialized in thrillers! In the second program, a one-act play, “The Sacrifice of Isaac,” was presented, in which Isaac fails to take on the persona of God and asks to be treated with respect and to be allowed to go to the Jebusites’ parties.

The story of the Akkedah in Israeli art carries on a dialogue with the Bible in which there is also a confrontation with the Israeli political reality. This story, with its three constituents – art, tradition and politics – does not depict a vital myth but a passive view of the world. Israeli culture in its dealings with the Akkedah does not proclaim a happy end. The shofar of redemption fashioned from a ram’s horn and blown on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in 1967 no longer proclaims redemption but the sacrifice of the sons in endless wars.

The genealogy of the myth of the Akkedah in poetry and art follows the stages of the Israeli-Jewish dialectic. Sometimes it is emphasized, and sometimes it is suppressed. This dialectic preserves the glowing embers of Jewish culture that contain traditions, images and symbols. Thus, it is not a petrified Judaism that is preserved, but a dynamic and dialogic Judaism that is formed. The biblical words, metaphors and discourse are examined and interpreted in the praxis of Israeli daily life, and in this way, Israeli culture reveals its roots in Jewish tradition. A.B. Yehoshua gave a good description of this process:

The Akkedah comes back to us as a basic motif in our society. It constitutes a kind of basic symbol in our culture that will remain with us for thousands of years. That is what is wonderful and frightening about cultural symbols.

(Yehoshua, 1971)
The political use of ancient myths

The dichotomy between the monotheistic Jewish myth represented by “Abraham” and the heroic and aesthetic myth of the Hebrew rebirth exemplified by “Nimrod” found expression in the revolt of the Hebrew Tze’irim (young intellectuals) at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The awakening of the Jewish national consciousness at the end of the 19th century that resulted in the birth of Zionism also changed the attitude of many Jews to the ethos of heroism. The progenitors of the Hebrew rebirth no longer concerned themselves with the intellectual traditions of the rabbis and scholars, hassidim and cabbalists but were inspired by the “Nimrods” – heroes, brandishers of the sword who cultivated a “muscular Judaism” (Ohana, 2012, 122–178). Nimrod and Herod, two men of impressive appearance, were hunters who opposed the Jewish ethos. Both their origins non-Jewish: Nimrod came from Ethiopia and Herod was of Edomite origin. Both figures are associated with despotism, conquest, building and cruelty. The exhibition “Herod – the Last Journey of the King of Judea,” which took place in the Israel Museum in 2013, stood at the intersection of the museum. Yitzhak Danziger’s sculpture “Nimrod,” the most significant work of art created in Israel, stood opposite the largest and most impressive archaeological exhibition given in the museum since it was founded, which bore the name of Herod.

The Zionist archaeological urge to find an affinity between the biblical past and the new Israel gained encouragement from David Ben-Gurion, who said that “In the general field of Jewish studies, Jewish archaeology will take its rightful place, for all its findings bring our past into the present and confirm our historical continuity in the country” (cited in Feige & Shiloni, 2008). Biblical archaeology in Israel, which has focused on excavations in Jerusalem, Nablus, Beit El, Beit Shean and Lachish, has sought to create a justification for Zionism by throwing a bridge between heroic ancient history and modern territorial nationalism. In this way, archaeology becomes ideology; moreover, it becomes myth. In order for the Herodian and Nimrodian myths to preserve their vitality, they must, like all myths, exemplify an “inner dialectic” in a plastic form: it must strengthen certain elements that are required and repress those that do not have the necessary function. The “new discourse” on Herod and Nimrod suits the nationalization of the heroic and the muscular spirit by creating a favourable view of them and by glorifying their artistic and architectural projects facilitates their return to a central position in the life of the historical land of Israel.

In 2016, three years after the “Herod” exhibition in Jerusalem, the exhibition “Bar Kokhba: Historical Memory and the Myth of Heroism” was held in the Eretz Israel Museum in Tel Aviv (Turel, 2016). At the entrance and exit of the exhibition, a short film was shown of a kindergarten in which the children sang Levin Kipnis’s famous song, “There was a man in Israel/ His name was Bar Kokhba…He was a hero/ He yearned for freedom” (Kipnis, 1971). The song relates how Bar Kokhba overcame a lion, a victory that metaphorically exemplifies the national consciousness of the modern Jews, which cultivated for its own purposes the idea of the heroism of Bar Kokhba, who rebelled against the Roman Empire. It was one more national hero in the restorative pantheon of Zionist heroism (Aderet, 2016). This restorative allusion was intended to glorify Zionism as a political movement that renewed the Jews’ national freedom at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th.

The tragic outcome of the rebellion would have caused a national trauma in any normal people, and indeed, the negative view of the Bar Kokhba revolt in Jewish tradition until the rise of Zionism testifies to the historical trauma among the Jewish people throughout the whole of their exile from their land (Marks, 1994). An attempt to get to the roots of this trauma requires a study of the theoretical literature on historical traumas, which has gained momentum in the last few decades. Basing themselves on the pioneering work of Freud and Jung, psychologists,
historians, cultural critics and political theorists have broadened the investigation of collective national and social traumas (LaCapra, 1994; Leys, 2000; Caruth, 1995).

By nature, intellectuals are critical and hence tend to deconstruct national myths. The leading scholar of the history of religious messianism and the leading scholar of the history of secular messianism both broadened the scope of their investigations—the first, Gershom Scholem, extending them into the history of Sabbataianism and the second, J.L. Talmon, into the French Revolution. Both reached a similar conclusion: they recognized, as Scholem put it, “the profound truth relating to the dialectics of history…whereby the fulfillment of one historical process leads to the manifestation of its opposite. In the realization of one thing its opposite is revealed” (Ohana, 2010, 66–73; 2017, 223–246). The two great Israeli historians of ideas plumbed the depths of one of the most fascinating and at the same time tragic manifestations of la condition humaine: the human challenge of bringing the heavenly city down to the vale of tears and the price that men have to pay for their messianic passion. Talmon saw Scholem’s field of expertise, Sabbataianism, as a historical precedent that contained a warning for the future of the State of Israel. Talmon declared: “I am very afraid of the time when we sober up and experience Sabbataian disillusionment with all that involves” (Talmon, 1970). Ten years later, in 1980, Talmon repeated this warning in his final article, addressed as an open letter, to the Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin: “Is it an escape into a world of mythological thought patterns and emotions whose classical example may be found in Sabbatianism?” (Talmon, 2015). Scholem was asked, “about his [Talmon’s] fears that a spirit of religio-national messianism has taken over parts of the Israeli population.” Scholem answered:

Well, I agree with Talmon on this. I am less optimistic than Talmon about the power of professors to influence events. But as an analysis of the facts, I think he is quite right that the use of religious ideas is a most harmful and senseless thing in politics.

(Howe, 1980, 53–57)

Talmon and Scholem were not just historians who analysed the abstract messianic idea but were also intellectuals who examined messianism as a paradigm through which one can decipher modern and current politics, Israeli and worldwide. My aim is also to explore Talmon’s and Scholem’s predictions about the price of messianism in theory and practice through the messianic dialectics and dynamics.

The young Talmon’s “structural search”, to use Claude Levi Strauss’s concept, was fulfilled in secular Zionism. History was not a mere accumulation of events but a structure, a non-human a priori mechanism that directs and controls events and their inner logic. It was a morphological form, as Oswald Spengler would have said, or, as Carl Schmitt put it in Political Romanticism (1919), “The idea of an arbitrary power over history is the real revolutionary idea” (Schmitt, 1986). Unlike these two German thinkers who affirmed impersonal structures, Talmon and Scholem adopted a “structuralist explanation” but, at the same time, undermined it. They formulated the Sabbataian code of “messianism through sin” and “redemption through destruction,” but they also warned of the nationalization of messianism. Talmon and Scholem were committed and critical intellectuals who did not wish to throw out the Zionist baby with the bathwater. The subject of messianism was close to their hearts because it was their way of revealing conceptual and historical dialectics. Talmon decided at the height of his maturity to investigate Jewish history and consequently sought the blessing of the “rabbi” Scholem. In 1972, in a letter to Scholem, Talmon described his plan to write a trilogy about modern Jewish history in a universal perspective (Ohana, 2008, 169–188). This letter testifies to the mutual admiration of these two historians from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and shows their
common scholarly interest in the messianic phenomenon, in its historical dialectic and in the price to be paid for it.

The nationalization of messianism has not left the Israeli agenda. The new Jewish literature dealing with the study of messianism has almost attained the status of Torah studies in Israel. Almost half of Scholem’s work was on messianism, and it is no surprise that this subject was chosen as the one to be discussed on the study day for his 80th birthday. Moshe Idel suggested that one should not speak of a single messianic ideal or a single Zionist ideal (Idel, 2012, 22–53). Scholem’s focus on apocalyptic messianism was connected first and foremost to his Zionist outlook and the national feeling that moulded his life and thought, as well as his professorship and the thoughts of his academic successors. Linking up the teacher of messianism from the Hebrew University with his pupils who went to the messianic right raises a series of questions. Do not the leanings of the professors Rivka Schatz, Josef Ben-Shlomo and Yehuda Liebes from the messianic right reflect messianic materials they studied with Scholem, or perhaps the writings of Rabbi Abraham Kook? Was Scholem responsible for creating a messianic atmosphere that encouraged his best pupils to join the ideological camp of the messianic right? How can one explain the contradiction between Scholem’s need to separate messianism from Zionism and his pupils’ need to form a marriage between them?

It is fascinating to examine Scholem’s three outstanding pupils who share their professional and academic training under Scholem and their Zionist-messianic outlook characterized by a total faith in the Greater Land of Israel. Is it by chance that these three favoured pupils with a defined outlook were conducive for political ideas that tended to the messianic right? What was Scholem’s role, if any, in moulding their political path? Does the content of the master’s teaching – mysticism, not rationality, Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yohai, not Maimonides, messianism, Sabbatianism, the threefold affinity between language, mysticism and nationhood – suggest a deep influence? Did his political position, opposed to that of these pupils, expressed first in the broad humanism of the “Brit Shalom” and then in his condemnation of the Sabbatianism of the young people of Gush Emunim, testify to his lack of influence on their rightist political outlook, or was his deep influence on their mental landscape seen in the deep undercurrents of consciousness that reached down into the groundwaters of myth? If Scholem sought living myth in the form of Kabbala in order to revitalize conservative rabbinic Judaism, his “children” sought living myth in the Greater Land of Israel in order to revitalize Zionism. The three pupils were scholars of Kabbala and messianism who imbibed the elevated atmosphere of Jerusalem and formed their messianic outlook in the euphoria following the Six-Day War. From the seventh day onwards, a national and sacred particularism overcame the universalism of democracy in their outlook. The sanctity of the land and the supremacy of its Jewish citizens ruled out any principle of civic equality. The theological ethos that permeated their scholarship penetrated their way of thinking and produced a messianic philosophy of history. They abandoned the dialectic of their teacher, who had sought all his life to find an equilibrium between the noble messianic idea which pursued him from above and the dark sphere of the historical reality in which he was careful not to be caught.

An example of a moderated anti-messianic nationalism can be found in the Mediterranean attitude (some will call it “the Mediterranean utopia”) that was developed in Israel in the last two decades. The ideology of the melting-pot wished to make the Zionist outlook and the settling ethos with its native secular outlook and modern Western orientation into an Israeli identity with clearly defined limits. In contrast to this, the Mediterranean option offered a broadened Israeli identity with cultural mobility, a connection with tradition, many voices and intellectual and linguistic interchange. The early appearance of the writer and essayist Jacqueline Kahanoff’s (1917–1979) polyphonic voice was in contradiction to the hegemonic Israeli culture.
– Eurocentric, secular, socialist and masculine – in the country’s first two decades. Her essays and short stories were liminal in that they disregarded borders, blurred polarities such as East–West, hegemonic–“other”, and possessed a hybrid quality of reciprocity, stratification, variety, lack of dogmatism and played down the “oppositional” (Kahanoff, 2005). Kahanoff played an active role in the debate on Israel’s Mediterranean identity. As a precursor or as an intellectual personage, Kahanoff may become a criterion for an understanding of the different forms of identity in Israel’s culture-in-the-making, of questions of East and West and the intermediate areas, and of the place of Israel in the Mediterranean geo-cultural space.

Kahanoff could serve as an imaginary speedometer to gauge the speed at which the ship of the Mediterranean identity of the Israelis has sailed. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was a refreshing Levantine breeze in the hegemonic Western-secular-socialist intellectual climate that prevailed in Israel at that time. At the end of the 1990s, it was connected to the Mediterranean renaissance resulting from the winds of peace emanating from the Oslo Agreements between Israel and the Palestinians (1993) and the Barcelona Agreement between the European countries and the countries of the Mediterranean (1995). In the second decade of the 21st century, Kahanoff had a new efflorescence with the publication of her works in English, the extension of academic research on her writings and the emergence of an intellectual and cultural debate about her contribution to the discourse on the Mediterranean identity, the Levantine space, the feminist consciousness, immigration, post-colonialism, multiculturalism and transnationalism (Kahanoff, 2011). Her legacy was especially debated by the “Mediterraneans” and the “Levantines.” The former saw her as a reinforcement, particularly in her promotion of a hybrid identity and dialogue between East and West, between Europe and the Levant, while the latter saw her as one of the original thinkers who, very early on, proposed the Levantine identity as the sole possibility for the Israelis to become integrated into the area.

Already in 1935, at the ninth Zionist Congress, Ben-Gurion called for the Mediterranean option: “The Mediterranean is the bridge between Eretz-Israeli and Europe, and we must have a strong part in this” (Ben–Gurion, 1972, 402). After 20 years, he added and wrote about Israel as a Mediterranean country and concluded: “The sea is not a desert of water, as many people think” (Ben–Gurion, 1954, 8). Towards the end of his life, Ben-Gurion settled in the desert at Kibbutz Sede-Boker. He planned his grave so it would be in the place where Moses led Israel out of Egypt. On 3 December 1973, Ben–Gurion was buried alongside his wife Paula on the cliff overlooking Wadi Zin. The funeral was a formative event in the history of the state. The state bade farewell to its foremost leader, and in so doing, created a sacred national site, a destination for secular national pilgrimage. However, in achieving this, the state established a symbolic centre that was far removed from the political, social and demographic centre. Ben-Gurion’s grave is a central symbol of Israeli mamlakhiyyut, but at the same time, it gazes with perpetual criticism at Israel’s abandonment of the pioneering ethos and the dream of causing the desert to bloom. Ben–Gurion inserted a clear and personal voice into a national ceremony, thereby undermining its rationale – the rationale of nationalizing a leader in order to highlight national motifs in keeping with the outlook of that generation. One might say that even before the state nationalized the funeral ceremony of Ben–Gurion, Ben–Gurion nationalized it himself.

Ben-Gurion’s choice to be buried in the desert, like his choice to live in the desert, expresses an ambiguity. On the one hand, according to the pioneering view, the desert is a virginal place devoid of history, a space where the future is meant to be written. On the other hand, it relates to the nation’s ancient history and its formative period, to the ancient myths that were a central element in forming the Israeli ethos. According to the biblical narrative, on their journey to the Land of Israel, the Children of Israel passed by Wadi Zin. There is no decisive evidence that this wadi is indeed the place where the nation passed, not to mention the fact that contemporary archaeolo-
gists cast doubt on the veracity of the historical account of the Exodus. One might say that even if the name is accurate, this would indicate that the Negev – and certainly Ben-Gurion’s burial site – is located outside the land of Israel, on the way to it. It would seem that Ben-Gurion’s aim was to connect with the ancient myth, which he himself had laboured to nurture, through connecting with the Bible and, within the Bible, with the subject of the Exodus in particular. From a mythical point of view, the founding father of the Hebrew renaissance looks out from the precipice to the place where the Children of Israel passed on their journey towards the land. In other words, the reason for the choice of location went beyond family, community or political considerations; it was a means of connecting to the founding myth of the nation. As he attempted to do during his life, in his death, too, Ben-Gurion defined himself symbolically as part of the monumental history of the Jewish people according to the version that he himself established, ignoring the questions entailed in the social and political – and even physical – reality of his own time. The fact that the funeral happened to take place so soon after the Yom Kippur War symbolized the coming of age of Israeli society as it took leave of its founding father (Shapira, 2014). Ben-Gurion’s funeral may also be seen as a symbolic ceremony of transition of the Israeli nation from an ideological, mobilized, collective society to a privatized, polarized one devoid of a common vision.

In conclusion, orchestrating Herzl’s and Ben-Gurion’s secular messianism with subsequent readings of Zionism that eventually digressed from it, or rather intensified national and territorial visions, changed the traditional meanings of Judaism. And yet, these lineaments are brought forth along with spatial perceptions of the Jewish national home, perceptions that transcend political borders and political theologies. Discussed side by side with the critiques penned by intellectuals such as Scholem and Talmon, these events do not necessarily follow one another but rather unfold almost simultaneously, thereby exposing the meaning of Zionism as a modern nationalization of Judaism.

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