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| **Ginsberg, Asher Zvi Hirsh (1856-1927)** |
| **Ahad Ha’am** |
| Ahad Ha’am was born Asher Zvi Hirsh Ginsberg in 1856 in Skvira, Ukraine, to an affluent family that was religiously affiliated with the Hasidic movement, which emphasized communion with God and ecstatic practice. Like many of the Jewish intellectuals and modernizers of his generation, Ginsberg was self-taught in secular subjects and broke with religious practice in his teens. |
| Ahad Ha’am was born Asher Zvi Hirsh Ginsberg in 1856 in Skvira, Ukraine, to an affluent family that was religiously affiliated with the Hasidic movement, which emphasized communion with God and ecstatic practice. Like many of the Jewish intellectuals and modernizers of his generation, Ginsberg was self-taught in secular subjects and broke with religious practice in his teens.  File: Ginsberg.jpg  Figure 1.  Source: <http://www.hashalom.org.il/wiki/index.php?title=%D7%AA%D7%9E%D7%  95%D7%A0%D7%94:Mai.jpg>  His first significant essay, ‘Lo zeh ha-derekh’ (This is Not the Way), published under his nom de plume, Ahad Ha’am (One of the People) in 1889, outlined his criticisms of mainstream political Zionism, and his privileging of nationalist cultural projects over political activity. In this essay Ginsberg developed ideas that became central to his particular brand of Jewish nationalism, often known as ‘cultural’ or ‘spiritual’ Zionism: a commitment to a ‘national revival’ rooted in modern Jewish cultural production, particularly in the Hebrew language; he advocated settlement in Palestine only insofar as it provided a basis for national culture both in Palestine and the Diaspora. Out of a deep commitment to the Hebrew language as the vehicle of a national Jewish revival, Ahad Ha’am created and refined a modern, essayistic style in the fledgling tongue, providing inspiration and foundation for future Hebrew-language writers.  In 1896, Ahad Ha’am founded the Hebrew journal *Hashiloach*, which, according to Steven Zipperstein, immediately ‘established itself as the arbiter of good taste in the Hebrew literary world’ (Zipperstein 116). Ahad Ha’am had been a major critic of the poor quality of Hebrew literature. One of his goals for the journal was to create a Europeanized Hebrew journal whose idiom was drawn from modern European languages rather than ancient Jewish ones. The core of the journal was scholarship that advanced Ahad Ha’am’s explicit political goals: to create Jewish national cohesion through culture and language. This scholarly writing was privileged over fiction and poetry, which also appeared in HaShiloach, and everything that appeared in the journal had to contain explicitly Jewish content. Stylistically, Ahad Ha’am used his editorial chair to create a clean, lucid Hebrew prose style in stark contrast to the loose, meandering style then in vogue in Hebrew publications.  This emphasis on language and style in Hebrew prose composition extended as well to Ahad Ha’am’s own essays. His commitment to culture as a defining element of Jewish national life was reflected not only in the content but also in the style and language of his essays. Here, too, are found many of the innovations central to Ahad Ha’am’s modernism. When Ahad Ha’am began writing in Hebrew in the late 19th century, it was in the process of being created and refined as a modern literary language. Many of the early Hebrew writers sought to adapt earlier forms and vocabulary from biblical and rabbinic sources in order to create a modern language from an ancient one. But Ahad Ha’am sought to purge many of the older, sometimes florid locutions from his language, creating a spare, straightforward, argumentative style that was suitable for the modern Jewish culture he sought to establish.  Despite his creation of a modern Hebrew idiom, Ahad Ha’am’s vision of modern Jewish culture was a paradoxically conservative one, which looked backward toward the past for inspiration and was limited in its scope. He felt that all Hebrew literature should have Jewish content, drawn from Jewish history, tradition, and culture. He also excluded literature written in Yiddish and vernacular languages from his definition of Jewish culture, and disdained fiction and poetry. At the same time that he warned against the ossification of Jewish culture due to overreliance on ‘the book,’ or the laws of the Torah, he advocated for an equally dogmatic set of cultural norms that might govern a Jewish transition to modernity. He warned against the danger of Judaism ‘being split up into as many kinds of Judaism, each with a different character and life, as there are countries of the dispersion’ (Hertzberg 267). His sense that a monolithic national Jewish culture could unify the Jewish people brought Ahad Ha’am into conflict with some of the younger Jewish writers of his time, including M.Y. Berdyczewski and Y.H. Brenner. Berdyczewski in particular, who spent his career demonstrating and advocating for the diversity of Jewish culture and practice, engaged in a prolonged public disagreement with Ahad Ha’am over the direction of modern Jewish culture and letters. Even Berdyczewski, however, despite his disagreements with Ahad Ha’am, admitted that he had been deeply influenced by him.  Ahad Ha’am resigned as editor of HaShiloach in 1902, after conflicts with both writers and publishers, and in part because of his conviction that there was hardly enough good Hebrew writing for him to publish. His commitment to modernizing and aestheticizing Hebrew publishing was absolute. After leaving HaShiloach, he continued to write and publish, although he never produced the large-scale, sustained scholarly work he had once hoped to write. He moved to London in 1908 and finally settled in Mandate Palestine in 1922, in extremely ill health. He died in Tel Aviv in 1927. List of Works Ahad Ha’am (Asher Ginzburg) (1947). *Kol kitve Ahad Ha’am* |
| Further reading:  (Attia)  (Hertzberg)  (Hertzberg)  (Zipperstein)  (Zipperstein) |