



ASK HERZL

Asher Zvi Ginsburg - Achad Ha'am



Why was this small, balding Jewish man with glasses one of the most important Zionist leaders? Why is this former tea salesman, who never held an official position in the Zionist movement still one of the most relevant ideologues of our time?

Asher Zvi Ginsburg was born in the Ukraine on August 18, 1856 into a very well-respected Hasidic family. His childhood education was so strictly Orthodox that he was even forbidden to learn the Russian alphabet in case it would lead to him reading heretical texts. Despite this, by the age of eight he had taught himself how to read Russian by studying the fronts of shop stores in his local town of Skvira. By his adolescence he was renowned locally for his religious scholarship.

However, by his late teens he had started reading for himself the forbidden works of secular enlightenment that slowly led him to lose his religious faith. After he got married (an arranged marriage by his parents) and some challenging years he eventually moved to Odessa and started his career as a writer. In his first ever published work 'This is not the way' he signed his name as *Achad Ha'am* (one of the people) and that became his pen name for the rest of his career. With a wife and three children to support he subsequently gave up his literary career and became a salesman for a tea company which resulted in the family relocating to London, with Ginsburg heading the branch of the company in England. The family lived in London for fourteen years between 1907 and 1921.

Throughout this time Ginsburg became more and more involved with the proto-Zionist group *Hibbat Zion* (Lovers of Zion) and even attended the First Zionist Congress in Basel, as a representative of the *Hibbat Zion*. When living in London he was very influential to the future first President of Israel Chaim Weitzman and was a key adviser to Weitzman during the negotiations that resulted in the Balfour Declaration.



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He eventually made *aliyah* in 1921 and settled in Tel Aviv. In his years in Tel Aviv he became recognized as the unofficial leader of cultural Zionism in the new Hebrew city of Tel Aviv as his writings were hugely influential. In fact, he was so respected in Tel Aviv that the road in which he lived was closed to traffic during his afternoon rest so that he should not be disturbed. When he died on January 2, 1927 many thousands of Tel Aviv's residence attended his funeral.

So, what did Achad Ha'am actually believe and why is his philosophy so important for us today?

Watch [the video](#) to find out more.



Achad Ha'am visiting the Bezalel Art School in 1912

Key Quote:

“Judaism is, therefore, in a quandary: it can no longer tolerate the *galut* (exile) from which it had to take on, in obedience to its will to live, when it was exiled from its own country; but, without that form, its life is in danger. So it seeks to return to its historic center, where it will be able to live a life developing in a natural way, to bring its powers into play in every department of human culture, to broaden and perfect those national possessions which it has acquired up to now, and thus to contribute to the common stock of humanity, in the future as it has in the past, a great national culture, the fruit of the unhampered activity of a people living by the light of its own spirit.

For this purpose, Judaism can, for the present, content itself with little. It does not need an independent State, but only the creation in its native land of conditions favorable to its development: a good sized settlement of Jews working without hindrance in every branch of civilization, from agriculture and handicrafts to science and literature. This Jewish settlement, which will be gradual growth, will be come in the course of time the center of the nation, wherein its spirit will find pure



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expression and develop in all its aspects to the highest degree of perfection of which it is capable. Then, from this center, the spirit of Judaism will radiate to the great circumference, to all the communities of the Diaspora, to inspire them with new life and to preserve the over-all unity of our people. When our national culture in Palestine has attained that level, we may be confident that it will produce man in the Land of Israel itself who will be able, at a favorable moment, to establish a State there – one which will be not merely a State of Jews but really a Jewish State.”

The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem (1897)

Questions for discussion:

What does it mean to be a secular Jew in the 21st Century? Do we need Israel to be our ‘spiritual center’? Can I live a genuinely Jewish and secular life without the State of Israel?

Please send a video of your response to these questions to education@jnf.org! Our best responses will be posted on our website.



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