

American Zionism as we know it today did not start off as a cohesive and monolithic ideology. Rather, as it spread out across the American Jewish landscape, the tendrils of Zionist ideology deftly wove into broad conversations about assimilation, secularism, and national identities. Every iteration of American Zionism had its champions and detractors, but as it evolved and developed over the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a standard idea about how to be an American Zionist emerged. This idea is what Naomi Cohen calls "comfortable" American Zionism; that is, the mandate to provide financial support for a Jewish homeland, removed from ideological adherence to one political platform or to the act of making Aliyah (moving to Israel).<sup>1</sup> In response to potential criticisms of dual loyalty, Jewish nationalism was transformed into a philanthropic endeavor, an extension of a religious obligation to support a Jewish center in Palestine, the ancient homeland of the Jewish people. As anti-Semitism in Europe and the United States continued to rise to unsettling heights in the 1930s, the idea of a Jewish center and homeland became more appealing to American Jews and their leaders especially when calls for aid to Jews around the world were ignored. Among these Jewish leaders, intellectuals like Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis created a progressive Zionist movement which called upon American imagery of the Founding Fathers of the United States and merged the ideals of Zionism and Americanism into one cohesive and, ultimately, successful movement.

As Zionism in the United States slowly incorporated American ideals of democracy and patriotism, Zionist organizations opposed to ideas of American capitalism infecting a Jewish homeland fought to preserve the socialist foundations of Zionism imagined by Theodor Herzl. In their quest to promote a Jewish center built on the ideals of the *kibbutzim* and *halutzim*, the pro-Labor Zionist organizations began to alienate American Jews. Although the socialist roots of American Zionism never completely withered, they were overshadowed by the democratic ideals that served as the strategic center of American Zionism. American Zionism grew and evolved throughout the 1920s and 1930s, a student wing of the American Zionist movement, named *Avukah* (Hebrew for torch), emerged but failed to produce a lasting form of American Zionism. In its efforts to define Zionism, *Avukah* ultimately lost touch with the shifts within the American Zionist movement, failing to recognize where the tide of Zionist thought and opinions had moved among Jews and non-Jews alike.

Clinging to its purely ideological ideal of a socialist Jewish utopia, *Avukah* refused to acknowledge the growing concern for European Jewish refugees amidst the chaos of World War II. In fact, due to its strict adherence to a socialist utopia, the national leadership of *Avukah* chose to stage a coup in 1943 and dissolve the organization from within, rather than attempt to align itself with the larger American Zionist movement. The decision to implode the organization rather than follow the ideological flow of the larger American Zionist movement speaks to *Avukah's* wider organizational issues as well as the nature of American Zionism itself. For American Zionist organizations to stay intact throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially after the establishment of the State of Israel, their ideological roadmap had to be flexible and adhere to the pathways forged by the emerging mainstream American Zionist organizations that gained the hearts and the dollars of American Jews. Failure to adapt meant almost certain demise, as sustaining a presence on the American Zionist stage was contingent on the financial support from organizations such as the Zionist Organization of America, the World Zionist Organization, and others like them.

This paper analyzes the student Zionist organization *Avukah*, setting it in the context of the larger American Zionist movement and other Jewish student organizations. A close inspection of

---

<sup>1</sup> Cohen, Naomi Wiener. *The Americanization of Zionism, 1897-1948*. Hanover, N.H: Brandeis University Press, 2003.

the local *Avukah* chapter at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania provides a unique perspective on the organization's mission and the challenges that afflicted its chapters across the United States. Temple University's chapter in particular situates the history of the organization in the constant struggle for relevance among Jewish college students. Following the chronology of *Avukah*, from its creation to its downfall in the early 1940s, the trajectory of American Zionism slowly comes into focus, intersecting with *Avukah's* failure just as it began to see widespread success in the American Jewish cultural landscape.

### **Historiography**

As historians seek to understand the emergence and evolution of American Zionism, they have gradually considered the histories of and relationships among individual Zionist organizations in the United States. Ben Halpern's 1979 study traces the origins of American Zionism from its beginnings at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to 1930, highlighting the influence of early Zionists' Eastern European roots on the formation of the movement. In 1998, Mark Raider published *The Emergence of American Zionism* which likewise provides an excellent and thorough overview of the development of American Zionism, with a specific focus on individual groups of Labor Zionists and their relationship to American Jews. Finally, Naomi Cohen's 2003 book *The Americanization of Zionism, 1897-1948* offers much of the same overview of the development of American Zionism and particularly its disparate functions at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Avukah* only receives sustained attention in Robert Barsky's work on Zellig Harris, one of *Avukah's* key founders, and Barsky argues that the organization provides a unique lens into American Zionist ideology within the context of a student-led movement.

The dearth of analysis on the individual Zionist organizations may be attributed to the sheer number of groups and societies that have existed, often fleetingly, since Zionism came to the shores of the United States. While much of the literature considers the work of Zionist organizations such as the Zionist Organization of America, the World Zionist Organization, and the American Jewish Committee, historians tend to render the narrative of American Zionism from a much broader perspective. Rather than recounting the work of one organization, historians Cohen and Raider focus on the work and impact of several organizations on one another and do so with deep analysis of their history. By studying the rise and fall of a local chapter of *Avukah*, the sweeping rise and success of American Zionism comes sharply into focus. This paper also situates American Zionism within a liminal space between its foundational years in the 1920s and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Within these two decades, American Zionism grew into a mass movement, taking down many of its ideological variants along the way.

At the height of the existence of Jewish quotas in universities across the United States and amidst the creation and growth of other Jewish student organizations, such as the *Menorah Society* and *Intercollegiate Zionist Federation of America (IZFA)*, the student organization *Avukah*, Hebrew for "torch," was founded by two Harvard students. The two students were determined to address the subject of Zionism among college students, which they believed was controversial because so many American Jews were fixated on simply assimilating into American culture. As Cohen notes, "American Zionism...failed to impart to the Jewish youth the enthusiasm of the European *chalutz* (pioneer) movement or the idealism of *aliyah*."<sup>2</sup> In 1925, together with the *Harvard Zionist Society*, the *Avukah* founders "helped stimulate interest and even made attending Zionist meetings on campus

---

<sup>2</sup> Cohen, *Americanization*, 38.

'fashionable.'" <sup>3</sup> To promote this new approach to discussions on Zionism, one of the founders, Joseph Shubow, sent out invitations to "more active Jewish college groups to attend a national conference...immediately preceding the National Zionist Convention."<sup>4</sup> With a successful turnout of over twenty-two universities, the organizers created a new organization: *Avukah: the American Student Zionist Federation*. The founders felt that the images and emotions the term "torch" evoked among its members would ignite and guide the new Zionist movement to a brighter future for American Jewish youth.

To bolster *Avukah's* position as a uniquely student-led Zionist organization, the Zionist Organization of America (Z.O.A.) passed a resolution shortly after *Avukah's* founding in 1925, stating "that the [Zionist] Organization [of America] recognize *Avukah, American Student Zionist Federation*, as the only national Zionist organization in America operating among the colleges and universities..."<sup>5</sup> This resolution gave *Avukah* exclusive rights to function as the only Zionist organization on college campuses, setting the stage for future power struggles among other student Zionist organizations and national Zionist organizations. However, in 1925, the American Zionist movement had little to no hold on America's college youth, and thus in the excitement of renewed interest in Zionism among college students, the Z.O.A.'s resolution afforded *Avukah* the exclusive rights to external funding from the Z.O.A. In its early days, *Avukah* saw success at colleges across the country and "kindled new enthusiasm on the campus."<sup>6</sup> Wherever the leaders of *Avukah* went, local Zionist organizations and student Zionists came together with renewed enthusiasm in Zionism.

Early on as an organization, *Avukah* was focused on Jewish history and literature, with a particular aim to introduce Hebrew into high school curricula across the country. Its mission was to promote Jewish culture amongst college students and foster cultural activities, such as debates and lectures about Zionism. One of its most popular social functions was its Palestine Night, an event designed to highlight the music, poetry, art, and culture of Palestine. The first years of *Avukah* were fraught with the growing pains of a new organization and difficulties of a primarily student-led group, but the future of *Avukah* seemed bright, even with a few charges of the group's pseudointellectualism taken into consideration.<sup>7</sup> However, forces beyond *Avukah's* control, specifically the Arab Riots in 1929, would alter the focus and mission of American Zionists and change the organization's agenda.<sup>8</sup> This shift ultimately brought about *Avukah's* transformation from a predominantly culturally-focused Zionist organization to a political and ideologically-driven

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert F. Barsky, *Zellig Harris: from American Linguistics to Socialist Zionism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> *Avukah Annual 1925-1930*. New York City: Avukah, American Student Zionist Federation. From the Center for Jewish History, Guide to Campus Zionism Collection.

<sup>5</sup> *The Avukah Problem: A Special Report by the American Zionist Youth Commission*, October 1942. From the Center for Jewish History, Guide to Campus Zionism Collection. This resolution also guaranteed *Avukah* funding from the Z.O.A., according one dollar per member every year.

<sup>6</sup> Grand, Samuel. "A History of Zionist Youth Organizations in the United States from Their Inception to 1940." Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1958.

<sup>7</sup> The leaders of *Hashomer Hatzair*, a labor Zionist organization, and close ideological ally of *Avukah* "considered themselves far more engaged with practical and important issues than those in the more 'academic' *Avukah*." Barsky, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Tensions over access to the Western Wall between Muslims and Jews escalated into violence in August 1929. In response to the deaths that resulted from the riots and demonstrations, *Avukah*, along with other Zionist organizations, held protests against the Arab population and the British government. *Avukah* held their protest at Madison Square Garden on August 29, 1929.

Zionist group, led by a vanguard handpicked by University of Pennsylvania Professor of Linguistics, Zellig Harris. As *Avukah* transformed into a more politically driven organization under Harris’ leadership and as American Zionism grew in strength, the organization gained a national spotlight and, even, recognition from key figures in the American Zionist pantheon, such as Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis and physicist Albert Einstein.

However much the early iterations of *Avukah* may have appealed to already Zionist-leaning college students or garnered attention from big names in the Zionist movement, Zellig Harris’ implementation of a narrow ideological vision and insistence on appearing as an intellectually superior Jewish student organization made it difficult for the young organization to gain momentum on college campuses.<sup>9</sup> As historian Samuel Grand’s section on *Avukah* states, the “intellectual climate of university life during the early and middle thirties was not friendly to Zionism, which was considered to be ‘reactionary’ and ‘nationalistic.’”<sup>10</sup> But more than that, *Avukah* also suddenly had to contend with competition from the *Menorah Society*. The *Menorah Society*, an outgrowth of the early Jewish fraternities and sororities at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, provided a space for Jewish co-eds to interact and socialize with one another.<sup>11</sup> Where *Avukah* was an alcove for the Jewish student curious and enthusiastic about Zionism, the *Menorah Society* functioned as an entire hall, allowing space for a diversity of forms and functions of evolving American Jewish youth culture. It intentionally excluded Zionism from its purpose and mission, with an eye toward currying favor with secular university administrations and other student-led organizations. The *Menorah Society* would also continue to evolve its mission and focus, ultimately rendering the narrow focus of *Avukah* useless as it encompassed the intellectual and political spheres of young American Jews. Even as *Avukah* transformed from disparate local chapters spread across the country into one national organization, the *Menorah Society*, later known as the *Jewish Student’s Association (JSA)* surpassed it in local and national strength.

### **Temple University’s *Avukah* Chapter**

Throughout its spotty existence at Temple University, *Avukah* struggled to maintain a consistent presence on the university’s campus. Even at the height of the national office’s success under Zellig Harris, the local chapter at Temple could barely gain new members or foster any sense of loyalty among students from year to year. This despite the fact that by all accounts, Temple’s chapter was in the perfect location. Zellig Harris, first a student member, then an officer, and later the president of *Avukah*, had begun to cultivate his personal intellectual vanguard out of his parents’ home in Wynnewood, a suburb of the city of Philadelphia. He hosted held lectures on Zionism and encouraged debate among members of *Avukah*, notably, Nathan Glazer, Seymour Melman, James Waterman Wise, and his sister, Shoshana Harris. Harris’ Zionist ideology emerged from his own experience with Labor Zionism, a movement that promoted Jews from Diaspora settling in Palestine and enacting a socialist vision of cooperative living amongst the indigenous Arab population. For American Zionism, Labor Zionism “played a key role in defining the new Zionism of American Jews, a philosophy and program attuned to the changing reality of American Judaism

---

<sup>9</sup> See Barsky’s “Avukah” section in *Zellig Harris*.

<sup>10</sup> Grand, “A history”, 113.

<sup>11</sup> As one of the United States’ earliest Jewish organizations, *The Menorah Society*’s mission was the “promotion...of the study of Jewish history, culture, and problems, and the advancement of Jewish ideals.” Excerpt from *The Menorah Movement: For the Study and Advancement of Jewish Culture and Ideals*.

and the needs of prestate Israel.”<sup>12</sup> Yet Harris was mainly focused on the idealism of Zionism, and the intellectual conception of a Jewish center in Palestine. Harris also held very negative opinions about the state of American Zionism in the mid-1920s and early 1930s, stating in his own writings that “American Zionism has fallen into a rut of its own creation from which it must be extracted by a revival of spirit. And the reviver does not come. No one emerges from this humiliating affray to lead the organization — or rather to create anew a Zionist movement in America.”<sup>13</sup> Harris saw himself as the leader of such an organization and *Avukah* held the key to guiding the American Zionist movement into a new age. In 1928 James Waterman Wise, a prominent member of the New York City intelligentsia, helped centralize the organization and established a national office in New York City, with Max Rhoades, one of *Avukah*’s Harvard founders acting as president.

As Harris moved into the position of officer in the national office, the focus of *Avukah* shifted towards the idealistic and intellectual vision of Labor Zionism, and the official publication of the group, *The Avukah Bulletin*, began publishing articles promoting this new paradigm. Within every issue of the *Bulletin*, a section entitled “Chapter Activities” detailed the events and accomplishments of local chapters, highlighting their commitment to the organization. This section belies the true state of the relationship between the national office and the local chapters, an uncomfortable tension perpetuated by the national office. In its attempts to present the organization as one cohesive group, the national office took measures to ensure that the chapters were operating along the ideological lines promoted by the national leadership. Chapters within striking distance of the national office, namely those along the Eastern Seaboard, were constantly visited by officers and often the chapters’ appeals to the office for more freedom in their operations were met with blanket rejections. Strict adherence to the ideals and intellectual goals laid out in the pamphlets and publications of the national office left little room for local university chapters to create new programming that could potentially meet the unique needs of their students and community.

In the December 1929 issue of *The Avukah Bulletin*, the “Chapter Activities” section included a small blurb about the formation of a chapter at Temple University. It stated that “Through the efforts of the University of Pennsylvania Chapter, there is an actively working chapter at Temple University in Philadelphia.”<sup>14</sup> Yet Temple University’s chapter had already been formed once before and dissolved by 1929. In 1926, Dental School student Nathan Plafker founded the first iteration of *Avukah* on Temple’s campus, shortly after the establishment of the first chartered *Avukah* at Harvard University. This first attempt at a Temple chapter lasted for only one academic year before it dissolved in 1927, following the graduation of its president and founder.

The cycle of forming and then dissolving the organization created pockmarks in the record of the chapter at Temple, often leaving gaps in the record of the student newspaper *The Temple News* and the *Templar* yearbook. For years at a time, an absence on Temple’s campus would exist before the organization was once again resurrected, usually with help from the University of Pennsylvania and its ties to the national office. These resurrections speak to the troubling nature of *Avukah*’s failure to sustain its membership across the country. The trajectory of *Avukah* as a youthful and relevant Zionist organization would be tested again and again by the shifting landscape of the larger American Zionism movement in the face of anti-Semitism, fascism, and the Great Depression. During the Great Depression, the organization struggled to maintain support among students because of the membership dues and the need for constant fundraising. Grand

---

<sup>12</sup> Mark A. Raider, *The Emergence of American Zionism* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Barsky, *Zellig Harris*, 190.

<sup>14</sup> *The Avukah Bulletin*, December 1929, “Chapter Activities.” Article. New York City: Avukah, American Student Zionist Federation. From the Center for Jewish History, Guide to Campus Zionism Collection.

writes that "membership in a dues-paying, fund-raising organization was out of the question for a great many students."<sup>15</sup> Promoted as a commuter school, Temple's student population was largely made up of first- and second-generation Jewish Americans, many socially conditioned by parents and grandparents who had immigrated from shtetls in Eastern Europe to economize. Often the vision the students saw for themselves was receiving an education and moving upwards to bigger and better things. If along the way they had support from a Jewish social organization, all the better, though these students would turn to the *Menorah Society*, not *Avukah*, for social events and gatherings.

In 1918, the Temple University *Menorah Society* joined other universities across the country in the "promotion...of the study of Jewish history, culture, and problems, and the advancement of Jewish ideals."<sup>16</sup> Unlike *Avukah*, the *Menorah Society* at Temple was consistent in its membership and had its events publicized on a regular basis by *The Temple News*. However, despite the popularity of the group, the *Society* faced a crisis of dissolution. In the Fall of 1926, a contested election exacerbated tensions between the newly elected officers and the unenthusiastic general organizational student body.<sup>17</sup> After an overwhelming majority of 300 students attended a reorganization meeting of the *Society*, new and more radical plans were crafted for the organization, including a measure to secure backing for a Jewish Student House near campus. This measure would require the organization to garner support from the Temple University administration, which they successfully acquired in the following academic year.

In a 1927 address to the *Menorah Society*, Laura Carnell, Dean and Associate President of the University, advocated and later installed a course in Jewish history and literature to the morning schedule of classes. A year later, the leaders of the *Society*, along with a committee from the United Synagogues of America, submitted a resolution to purchase a house for Jewish students to the President, Charles Beury, and Carnell, which they approved.<sup>18</sup> With such vocal supporters, the *Society* enjoyed the approval and backing of the University's administration. Although *Avukah* shared a close connection to the University of Pennsylvania's *Avukah* chapter, Temple's group did not enjoy the same Temple support as the *Menorah Society*, a function of the very elementary understanding that non-Jewish faculty and administrators had of Zionism and, also, of the still controversial nature of American Zionism.

The Arab Riots in the summer of 1929 fractured American Jews and caused tension among Zionists. While relief funds were set up to aid the Jewish people within Palestine, "American Jews broke ranks and spoke in many tongues."<sup>19</sup> Along a spectrum of Jewish voices, tensions began to rise about whether Zionist ideology could include a vision for a binational state of Jews and Arabs in Palestine. On one end, the anti-Zionists took a firm pro-Arab position on principle, the Communists creating an analogy between the capitalist Zionists and the proletariat Arab people. On the other end, Zionists asserted that their aim was always to work alongside and share with the Arab people. However, as Cohen notes, this stance put the Zionists on the defensive, because they "felt impelled to reiterate time and again how the *Yishuv* shared its educational and welfare

---

<sup>15</sup> Grand, *A history*, 114.

<sup>16</sup> Excerpt from *The Menorah Movement: For the Study and Advancement of Jewish Culture and Ideals*. Pamphlet. From the Center for Jewish History, Jewish Student Organizations Collection.

<sup>17</sup> *The Temple News*. "Menorahites Have Big Turn-Out At Meeting." Article. Philadelphia: *The Temple News*. 1926-1927 *Temple News* Archive Collection.

<sup>18</sup> The United Synagogues of America had previously helped the University of Pennsylvania's Jewish students acquire a Student House near campus.

<sup>19</sup> Cohen, *Americanization*, 78.

institutions with the Arabs."<sup>20</sup> The infighting and fractured nature of American Jews' views of Zionism paved the way for some anti-Semitic responses from non-Jewish news outlets and, even, the spread of Henry Ford's publication of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Charges of imperialism, a backwards morality produced in the communist *kibbutzim*, dual loyalty and Jewish domination of the world were levied against Zionists, and anti-Zionist sentiment became fused with anti-Semitic stereotypes and rhetoric. The Americanization of Zionism could not succeed if non-Jewish Americans viewed the movement negatively. Support for Zionist organizations became increasingly difficult and altogether impossible in some circumstances. Even as the larger American Zionist movement abandoned its ideas of a Jewish state and focused primarily on philanthropic endeavors, *Avukah* and other organizations like it would not be so easily deterred.

In an effort to maintain a steady presence on Temple University's campus, members of the national office and Harris' inner group visited the local *Avukah* chapter and put on lecture series. One such lecture series, titled "Zionism in America," was delivered by Harry Orlinsky, one of Zellig Harris' proteges, and took place in the home of Temple *Avukah* member, Leon Magil.<sup>21</sup> Though the *Menorah Society*, now called *Jewish Students' Association*, had obtained a house and meeting space in 1928, the organization was wont to share its space with *Avukah*. The *Temple News* detailed several meetings and events at the *JSA* house highlighting *Avukah's* involvement, but these joint efforts were infrequent and typically promoted as *JSA* events with *Avukah* members simply encouraged to attend.<sup>22</sup> It wouldn't be until much later in the 1940s, after the *JSA* aligned its mission and values alongside those of the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation, that the *JSA* would begin to host their own Zionist events. It is not a coincidence that the *JSA* waited until the shift in the American Zionist landscape to embrace and promote Zionism under their own banner. Their association with Temple's *Avukah* chapter was sometimes fraught, though many of the leaders of the local chapter were also leaders and members within the *JSA*. Unlike *Avukah*, the *JSA* was beholden to the acceptance and continued support of Temple University's administration and staff. Once the tides of American Zionism turned favorable and was embraced by non-Jews, the *JSA* was given ample space to hold events and trips, such as annual trip to a Palestinian Training Farm in New Jersey. In addition to lecture series held on campus, *Avukah* members were welcomed to attend the *Avukah* Summer School, held at Camp Scopos on Lake George in New York. The Summer School was designed to educate and prepare active student Zionists to lead their local university chapters, with a heavy emphasis on adult-led discussions and lectures. Successfully run for nine years of *Avukah's* organizational lifespan, the Summer School was yet another mechanism to cultivate the best and brightest, as determined by the adult leaders of the organization, such as James Waterman Wise, a member of the Administrative Committee of *Avukah*. The pervasive control over *Avukah's* educational and cultural work by the adult leadership of the national office would continue to boil over as *Avukah* moved through the 1930s and exacerbate tensions among student leadership.

Even as early as 1932, rumblings amidst the leadership called for the publication of an article in the February edition of *The Avukah Bulletin* titled "Problems of Avukah Cultural Work." In the article, Vice President of *Avukah*, Solomon Abramov stated that "If our organization has any

---

<sup>20</sup> Cohen, *Americanization*, 80.

<sup>21</sup> *The Temple News*, January 20, 1933. Article. Philadelphia: *The Temple News*. 1932-1933 *Temple News* Archive Collection.

<sup>22</sup> The *JSA* would move their house once again in the Spring of 1933 to the Odella S. and David M. Ellis Memorial House for Jewish Students and retain that residence into their transition to the Hillel at Temple University in the mid-1940s.

task in the future, it is to add to the rank of the Zionists a number, however small, of young men who will contribute their share to raise the morale and strengthen faith in our national ideals."<sup>23</sup> Abramov argued that the Jewish youth in colleges and universities were not adequately being engaged by *Avukah* due to its lack of focus on a "working terminology which makes clearer and more intelligible current events in Zionist history."<sup>24</sup> He went on to claim that this cultural work, built into the literature and programming of all individual *Avukah* chapters, would pave the way for their ultimate goal, "to prepare our people for actual participation in the upbuilding of Palestine."<sup>25</sup> In an effort to promote the cultural work and literature of *Avukah*, the national office chose to dedicate the 1932 *Avukah Annual*, a publication meant to provide an overview of the previous year, to Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis in honor of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. Each year, *Avukah* sent a select group of its members from across the country to visit the judge in Washington, D.C. where they had the chance to speak with him on his work within the American Zionist movement. *Avukah's* close relationship to Brandeis was complemented by their close relationship to physicist Albert Einstein.

Over a 1930 international broadcast from his position on the *S.S. Belgenland*, Einstein addressed the nation under the auspices of *Avukah* and advocated for Labor Zionism and a Jewish homeland in Palestine.<sup>26</sup> *Avukah* would again call upon Einstein in 1935 to show support for their cause by asking him to join their Advisory Committee of Palestine Fellowships, which he accepted. The Palestine Fellowships consisted of a one-year paid trip and stay in Palestine for student members of *Avukah*, after which they would return to the United States and visit *Avukah* chapters across the country and hold lectures on their experiences abroad. Yet even this program and the backing of two prominent Zionists in the United States could not shield *Avukah* from the constant criticisms of pseudointellectualism, partisanship, and accusations of being too militant.<sup>27</sup> All of these criticisms and charges culminated in the creation of *Avukah's* three-front program entitled "A Program for American Jews," a pamphlet that was meant to clearly lay out the organization's ideology and mission.

The three-front program of *Avukah* is as follows: "First, the 'eventual liberation from the difficulties arising out of their minority position'; second, the creation of 'a new type of organization'; and third, the provision of 'such aid as they can to Jews in countries where anti-Semitism is strong' and, 'far more important than such palliatives...the definitive construction of the new Jewish settlement in Palestine.'"<sup>28</sup> In a May 1935 issue of the *Avukah Bulletin*, Zellig Harris wrote an article titled "Are We Partisan?" In the article, Harris addressed the accusations of partisanship that have been leveled at *Avukah* for its pro-Labor Zionism stance and argued that *Avukah* was not a political organization, but always had been and would be an education organization. He wrote, "Although it has taken a firm pro-Labor stand, *Avukah* is not partisan, is

---

<sup>23</sup> *The Avukah Bulletin*, February 1932, "Problems of Avukah Cultural Work." Article. New York City: Avukah, American Student Zionist Federation. From the Center for Jewish History, Guide to Campus Zionism Collection.

<sup>24</sup> *The Avukah Bulletin*, February 1932, "Problems of Avukah Cultural Work."

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *The Avukah Bulletin*, December 1930, "Professor Albert Einstein Gives Avukah Students Views on Palestine in International Broadcast." Article. New York City: Avukah, American Student Zionist Federation. From the Center for Jewish History, Guide to Campus Zionism Collection.

<sup>27</sup> The charges levied against *Avukah* can be found in *The Avukah Problem: A Special Report by the American Zionist Youth Commission*, October 1942.

<sup>28</sup> Barsky, 223.



not limited to one party in Zionism, has not changed its character as an educational group."<sup>29</sup> In addition to the three-front program, *Avukah's* defense of its ideology was muddy. Ideologically, *Avukah* desired a new world order, wherein Jewish people would exist within society without the fear of anti-Semitism. Yet it offered no praxis or clear definition of what needed to change in the world for such a society to exist. When examined on the surface, the clear objective of *Avukah* was to create a world in which socialism was the only form of governance, hence its alignment with the Labor Zionist movement. However, a deeper look into *Avukah's* operation and internal dynamic reveals its only tenuous connection to the Labor Zionist movement. Zellig Harris and others within the national leadership were all but obsessed with their own socialist utopic Jewish center in Palestine. However, they lacked the clarity of their own ideology to accomplish such a grandiose ideal.

Even as it promoted itself as a purely educational organization, *Avukah* refused to adjust to the shifts within American Zionism nor to the larger issues Jews around the world faced. Where groups like the *JSA* engaged with non-Jewish organizations in response to the outbreak of World War II, *Avukah* forged ahead with its academic lecture series focused on sweeping and generalized ideas about Zionism, Jewish culture and history. As individual *Avukah* chapters made efforts to address the growing anti-Semitism in Europe, the national office published articles concerning labor organizing and the economic situation in Palestine. *The Avukah Bulletin* diligently followed the Nazis and reported on the rise in fascism in the United States, yet its focus was always drawn back to Palestine and the efforts Zionists should be pursuing to ensure good labor relations between Jewish people and Arabs. While American Zionism began to gain traction in the late 1930s and early 1940s, sharpening its focus on preparing Palestine as a safe haven for Jewish refugees from Europe, *Avukah* still fretted about the implementation of its three-front program. For *Avukah*, the socialist utopia it envisioned for a Jewish Palestine would not be shelved in favor of the present crisis for European Jewish refugees. The divide between the immediate focus of American Zionism and *Avukah's* Zionism was also present within its own ranks, most notably within the national office and leadership.

In 1938, Temple *Avukah* member Leon Korin was granted the Fellowship and embarked on his one year journey to Palestine. When he returned from his trip, Korin became the Chairman and one of two remaining members of the last iteration of *Avukah* at Temple. Korin dissolved the group at the end of the 1941-1942 academic year, marking the end of *Avukah's* existence on Temple University. A year later at the 1943 national *Avukah* conference, leaders from the national office voted to dissolve the entire organization. In the lead up to shuttering its doors, *Avukah's* organizational arrangements had shifted with the start of the Second World War. As men from the national office and general body began to leave to fight overseas, women took over the leadership roles and began shifting the focus of the organization. Rather than focusing on the socialist utopia and three-front program, the women who took over, notably Irene Schumer and Lillian Schoolman, wanted *Avukah* to have a practical rather than ideological approach to the threat of fascism and Nazism.

Ultimately, the decision to dissolve the organization, rather than change its ideological approach, came from Zellig Harris and Seymour Melman, one of Harris' closest proteges. In late 1942 the inner circle within the national office in New York City staged a "revolutionary coup".<sup>30</sup> If the inner circle and its leaders could not have full control over the future of the organization, it

---

<sup>29</sup> *The Avukah Bulletin*, May 1935, "Are We Partisan?" Article. New York City: Avukah, American Student Zionist Federation. From the Center for Jewish History, Guide to Campus Zionism Collection.

<sup>30</sup> Barsky, *Zellig Harris*, 50.

would be better for it to not exist at all. Thus, in June 1943, the student Zionist organization *Avukah* ceased to exist under the auspices of the New York City national office and its leadership. *Avukah* continued as an organization, however, it would only exist in name until it was incorporated into the umbrella organization of the *Intercollegiate Zionist Federation of America*.

## **Conclusion**

Today, American Zionism is defined by one clear fact: the State of Israel exists. Yet this should not occlude the complex and ideologically variegated history that brought us to this present moment. To lose this history and muddy the waters of American Zionism is to obscure the trajectory of the movement, and even go so far as to forget that the State of Israel was not inevitable. That Jews envisioned a safe space for the Jewish people to live without the threat of anti-Semitism and oppression is not a particularly new sentiment for a disenfranchised group. However, the success of this movement and its current iteration in the modern world is quite another thing altogether. The works of Naomi Cohen and Mark Raider are diligent and well-researched biographies of the American Zionist movement and their insights into the many moving parts and machinations of the movement provide the historical and cultural context necessary to explore an individual organization like *Avukah*.

The illusive figure of Zellig Harris, who loomed large over *Avukah*, was brought into clear focus by Robert Barsky and further bolstered by the interviews he conducted with former *Avukah* members. Without the insight of the national leaders and inner circle, the story of Zellig Harris and *Avukah* would be lost or mostly forgotten, as student organizations do not often leave many records behind. The records that have been preserved in the collections within the Center for Jewish History in New York City provide the trajectory of the movement in the members' own words. They are supplemented by the articles found within the *Temple News* and *Templar* yearbook at Temple University.

Though American Zionism as a movement and *Avukah's* Zionist ideology converged and grew together during the 1920s and 1930s, *Avukah's* lack of ideological clarity and constant need to defend itself against its detractors caused it to stall many times over and ultimately fail. Where *Avukah* faltered and lost traction, American Zionism saw new purpose and life in the great push to help European Jewish refugees escape Nazism and fascist persecution. This acute and immediate issue reinvigorated American Zionism, channeling the philanthropic nature of the movement into an actionable phase that culminated in the call for a Jewish homeland for the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. For *Avukah*, the inner circle's ideological and intellectual focus on creating a socialist utopia in Palestine held the utmost importance. Palestine could not accept Jewish refugees if the labor disputes and British imperialism remained unaddressed. Yet *Avukah* offered no praxis, no identifiable way to obtain this utopic idea. When the individual local chapters across the country attempted to change their missions and help with the refugee crisis, their requests were met with rejection and derision. If *Avukah* was going to face its detractors and maintain its purely educational stance, it had to provide a united front, even at the expense of support from their chapters.

The study of the history of American Zionism through the prism of an individual Zionist organization is still a vast and underexplored in the field of American Jewish history. By paying attention to the growing pains and evolution of American Zionism through the prism of a student-led organization, the history of a fractured and fragile movement can be brought into a new light. The study of a student-led organization may also inform the current state of American Zionism on college campuses in the United States and contextualize the mounting tensions by examining administrative approval and support of these organizations. There is still much more work to be

done on student-led Zionist organizations and the historiography of American Zionism can benefit from further case studies and thorough histories.

### **Bibliography**

- Avukah Annual 1925-1930*. New York City: Avukah, American Student Zionist Federation. From the Center for Jewish History, Guide to Campus Zionism Collection.
- Barsky, Robert F. *Zellig Harris: from American Linguistics to Socialist Zionism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.
- Cohen, Naomi Wiener. *The Americanization of Zionism, 1897-1948*. Hanover, N.H: Brandeis University Press, 2003.
- Grand, Samuel. "A History of Zionist Youth Organizations in the United States from Their Inception to 1940." Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1958.
- Raider, Mark A. *The Emergence of American Zionism*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.
- The Avukah Bulletin*. New York City: Avukah, American Student Zionist Federation. From the Center for Jewish History, Guide to Campus Zionism Collection.
- The Avukah Problem: A Special Report by the American Zionist Youth Commission*, October 1942. Pamphlet. From the Center for Jewish History, Guide to Campus Zionism Collection.
- The Temple News*. Philadelphia: Temple University. The Temple News Archive Collection.
- The Avukah Problem: A Special Report by the American Zionist Youth Commission, October 1942*. From the Center for Jewish History, Guide to Campus Zionism Collection.