

The ideological test of Ahad Ha'am: the struggle over the character of *Bnei Moshe*

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ABSTRACT Zionist historiography and historical scholarship typically portray *Bnei Moshe* as a secret order, consisting of a homogenous group of young intellectuals who zealously espoused the national cultural-Zionist world-view and doctrine of their leader and mentor Ahad Ha'am. In this article I establish that this group – whose prominent members included well-known figures such as Haim Nahman Bialik, Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, Elhanan Levinsky, Chaim Weizmann, Meir Dizengoff, and others – was actually plagued by deep ideological rifts, with some of its members pushing for the adoption of the national religious values associated with Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever, and others viewing the order as an elitist branch of the Hibat Tsiyon movement and its successor organization, the Odessa Committee, led by Moshe Leib Lilienblum and Leon Pinsker. Only after a protracted struggle did the group ultimately accept Ahad Ha'am's position and world-view.

Rumours of dissonance

THIS ARTICLE FOCUSES on a group of young Russian Jewish intellectuals who, in Odessa in the summer of 1888, founded the secret order *Bnei Moshe* ('The sons of Moses'). Ahad Ha'am (Asher Zvi Ginzburg's nom de plume),¹ the order's founder and ideologue, had joined the Hibat Tsiyon movement five years earlier, approximately two years after the first Zionist associations began to sprout up across Russia and Romania. Inspired by their enlightened intellectual (*maskilim*) leaders, which included Leon Pinsker and Moshe Leib Lilienblum of Odessa and Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever of Bialystok, these associations sought to establish a national movement to settle Jews in Palestine and to strive to set up a national autonomy there. They formally

1. The information on Ahad Ha'am in this article is based on Y. Goldstein, *Ahad Ha'am: A Biography* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Keter, 1992), and S. Zipperstein, *Elusive Prophet: Ahad Ha'am and the Origins of Zionism* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Am Oved, 1998).

constituted the Hibat Tsiyon movement at their first conference, held in the city of Kattowice in the Prussian province of Silesia, and subsequently requested the Russian authorities to recognize them as a legitimate, legally sanctioned organization. Ahad Ha'am, who was raised in a Hassidic Jewish ultra-Orthodox family but over time became an enlightened intellectual, and who was one generation younger than these leaders, believed that the idea of establishing a national autonomy in Palestine was unrealistic. Instead, he aspired to establish there a national-cultural centre for Jews and designated one primary goal for the Hibat Tsiyon movement 'to prepare the hearts of the people for its own nationality'. Jewish society, he maintained, did not regard the Jews as a people (or a nationality), and therefore the first task at hand was to educate them in this direction. He laid down his ideas in an essay titled 'This is Not the Way',² published in March 1889 in the Jewish nationalist-oriented Hebrew-language newspaper *Hamelits*. Just months earlier, in the summer of 1888, the ideas articulated in this essay, which made great waves among Lovers of Zion and transformed Ahad Ha'am into a Jewish national figure of major standing, had served him and a small group of supporters as the ideological foundation for the establishment of the secret order of Bnei Moshe.³

During its first year in existence, Bnei Moshe was perceived by the Lovers of Zion as a successful body whose members, by means of the secret order they had established, would ultimately succeed in achieving the national goals laid down by its leader. This promising image ran counter to the image of failure associated with the Hibat Tsiyon movement from which most of its members hailed. One manifestation of Bnei Moshe's success was the desire to join its ranks that was shared by so many at the time, including prominent figures within Hibat Tsiyon. In Jewish public opinion in Russia, Ahad Ha'am and his associates were perceived as harbouring political pretensions and aspiring to assume the leadership of Hibat Tsiyon. They were also perceived as a group with a consolidated national view grounded

2. Ahad Ha'am, 'This Is Not the Way', *Hamelits* 53 (15 March 1889) (in Hebrew).

3. The information on Bnei Moshe in this article is based on S. Tchernowitz, *Bnei Moshe and its Time* (in Hebrew; Warsaw: Badfus Hatzevira, 1914); J. Kornberg (ed.), *At the Crossroads: Essays on Ahad Ha'am* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1983); E. Stein-Ashkenazy, 'The Bnei Moshe Society, Its Center in Warsaw, and its Relationship to the Hibat Tsiyon Movement', *Hatsiyonut* 11 (1986), pp. 29–64 (in Hebrew); Y. Goldstein, 'Bnei Moshe: The Story of a Secret Order', *Tsiyon* 57 (1992), pp. 175–206 (in Hebrew).

in the ideology of its founder, as reflected in his article 'This Is Not the Way', and, perhaps most prominently, as the founders of an innovative school of Jewish thought that sought to create a new secular doctrine of religion, although neither Ahad Ha'am nor his associates actually held any such pretensions. It was these perceptions that accounted for the appeal of the new order. Following the establishment of Bnei Moshe, rumour quickly spread that the new order sought to disseminate ideas to serve as an alternative to the Orthodox religious notions that were conventional among both the Hassidim and their opponents, the Misnagdim, within the Pale of Settlement. Ahad Ha'am and his associates denied having any intention of pursuing such a goal and pointed out the ideological and cultural diversity of many of those who had secured membership in the order. At the time, however, their denial appears to have not been viewed as genuine, even though a few dozen members held different beliefs. Although the majority consisted of intellectuals, the group also had Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox members – Misnagdim and Hassids alike.

Ahad Ha'am had actually complained to his associates about the multiplicity of ideological views espoused by the order's membership. He regarded this ideological diversity as a cause of unhealthy pluralism and division within the ranks of Bnei Moshe, primarily between the founding group in Odessa and newer members who joined the order later in Bialystok and Vilna, in Eretz Israel, and elsewhere. However, even if this assessment was accurate, the rumours throughout the Pale of Settlement regarding the secular nature of the ideology of Bnei Moshe continued to spread, and actually served to increase the popularity of the order. Moreover, some figures who did not identify with the ideology of the founders or who did not believe the array of rumours regarding its image also sought to join its ranks. These individuals were interested in holding membership in an order with an elitist, clandestine image whose leaders they believed had a chance of assuming control of Hibat Tsiyon. For this reason, they initially sought to conceal their ideological differences with the leaders of Bnei Moshe and to give the impression of unified thinking, a dynamic that may have been enhanced by the fact that its members regarded it as a secret order whose existence needed to be strictly safeguarded.⁴ Relatively quickly, however, these differences became manifest

4. See Goldstein, 'Bnei Moshe: The Story of a Secret Order'.

and threatened to destroy the organization, as rumours of the dissonance spread and resulted in crisis.

The importance of the Jewish religion

It should therefore come as no surprise that Ahad Ha'am and the other founders of Bnei Moshe, who set up their headquarters in Odessa, Ahad Ha'am's city of residence and Hibat Tsiyon's centre of operations, harboured strong objections to the array of impressions associated with the order and sought to combat them however possible. To this end, they insisted that a congress that had been planned to mark the order's first anniversary be devoted to clarifying a number of ideological issues and working out practical problems related to its organization. At the same time, they sought to publish a compilation of articles, or a 'literary collection' (almanac), to provide answers to some of the problems raised by the group's image. From the order's very inception, members of Bnei Moshe had viewed the idea of such a publication as an endeavour in which they were obligated to engage, intended as it was to implement the major goals they had sworn to pursue: the intensification, expansion and dissemination of the Jewish national idea in accordance with their own doctrine and teachings. Now, alongside this motivating factor, the order's image and internal divisions emerged as additional influential reasons for the almanac's publication. Against this background, in the summer of 1889, as the divisions between the members of Bnei Moshe were intensifying, its leaders authored a number of articles that were collected and edited by Ahad Ha'am and published together under the title *Kaveret*.⁵

Most of the divisions between the members of Bnei Moshe revolved around the relationship between religion and nationalism. The rumours that spread throughout the Pale of Settlement intimated that Ahad Ha'am and his associates sought to change the principles of the Jewish religion. Though not grounded in reality and apparently disseminated by opponents of the order, these rumours raised apprehensions among the heads of Hibat Tsiyon's Orthodox branches in Vilna and Bialystok regarding the true motives of the secret order. Although the Orthodox rabbis Shmuel Yosef Finn and Shmuel Mohilever initially encouraged their close associates to join Bnei

5. Ahad Ha'am (ed.), *Kaveret* (in Hebrew; Odessa: Aba Duchna, 1890).

Moshe, their subsequent concern regarding Ahad Ha'am and his companions never subsided.⁶ For this reason, Mohilever instructed Avraham Shmuel Hirschberg, who was heading the order's branch in his own city, 'to raise the issue of religion' at Bnei Moshe's upcoming congress,⁷ and Finn, who just months earlier had advised his own son to join the order, quickly followed Mohilever's lead after falling subject to the latter's fundamental criticism. Against this background, Ahad Ha'am subsequently complained that Finn had 'betrayed' Bnei Moshe.⁸ Fearing that troubles for the order relating to the issue of religion would emerge in Bialystok, Vilna and Eretz Israel, Bnei Moshe's leadership in Odessa sought to defend itself against the attack and devoted significant space to the subject in *Kaveret*. Articles written by Ahad Ha'am; authors Yehoshua Eisenstadt (Barzilai, who himself was an orthodox Jew) and Elhanan Leib Levinsky; Moshe Leib Lilienblum, the leader of Hibat Tsiyon, who also sought to join the order; and others addressed the role of religion in the life of the Jewish People. Two themes featured prominently in these articles: the centrality of the Torah and Jewish precepts (*mitsvot*) in Hebrew education, and the observance of the Jewish precepts. Without a doubt, the articles' authors wanted to add national and general content to traditional Jewish education. At the same time, however, they sought to refute rumours that they were attempting to do away with education regarding the Torah and the Jewish precepts. On the contrary, wrote L.Y. Klatsko, it was essential 'to plant the Torah and the precepts in their [the Jews'] hearts and to foster the relationship between the different factions of the Jewish people and their god'.⁹ Eisenstadt, from his part, called for 'educating the children according to the path of the Torah and the precepts'.¹⁰

Despite the varying views of the members of Bnei Moshe regarding which precepts should be maintained and which should be given up, it was widely agreed that, as argued by Mendlin, the Torah and the Jewish precepts played a useful role in unifying the Jewish People and safeguarding its national

6. David Yeshaya Silberbusch, 'My Meeting with Ahad Ha'am', *Ha'olam* 29 (15 July 1930) (in Hebrew).

7. Tchernowitz, *Bnei Moshe and its Time*, p. 27.

8. Letter from Ahad Ha'am to Yehoshua Eisenstadt (Barzilai), 13 Elul 5649 (9 September 1889) (in Hebrew), Central Zionist Archive, Jerusalem (hereinafter CZA) A25/30/87.

9. K.Y. Klatsko, 'Call Them Your Builders, Not Your Children', in Ahad Ha'am, *Kaveret*, p. 22 (in Hebrew).

10. Eisenstadt, 'A Good Beginning', in Ahad Ha'am, *Kaveret*, p. 101 (in Hebrew).

identity.¹¹ According to Levinsky, 'the Torah, the love of god, his people, and his land' had preserved 'the community throughout the generations',¹² and Lilienblum held that 'the spirit and purity of our people are preserved in our holy texts, as well as in the *Mishna* and the *Agada*'.¹³ The fact that Bnei Moshe members' differences of opinion on the subject of religious education and the importance of religion in the context of Jewish nationalism were not brushed over or excluded by *Kaveret* was meant to indicate that these disagreements did not contradict the fundamental principles in which its members believed. The articles in *Kaveret* contained what can be understood as a declaration before the critics of Bnei Moshe that the order had no intention of working towards a renunciation of the importance of the Jewish religion or the observance of its precepts.

The decision of the majority

At the founding congress of Bnei Moshe on 8 February 1889 (7 Adar 5649), it was decided that the order's first year of operations would be a 'year of preparation',¹⁴ during which its members would focus on recruitment, the establishment of new branches and clarification of its platform. It was also decided that a congress would be held the following year to assess its achievements, discuss the disagreements that would arise in the interim, and codify its laws in a 'book of regulations' (although, as we will see, the leadership in Odessa failed to meet its own timetable).¹⁵ Ahad Ha'am and his associates asked the members of Bnei Moshe what they thought should appear on the congress agenda and where they thought the meeting should be held, but noted that most did not 'consider it obligatory to send us any response'.¹⁶ This in itself was an initial indication of a decline in the curiosity and interest that had been aroused by the order's establishment. With the exception of

11. Z.W. Mendlin, 'Unity', in Ahad Ha'am, *Kaveret*, p. 25 (in Hebrew).

12. E.L. Levinsky, 'We and Our Fathers', in Ahad Ha'am, *Kaveret*, p. 81 (in Hebrew).

13. M.L. Lilienblum, 'What Does Nationalism Demand?', in Ahad Ha'am, *Kaveret*, p. 9 (in Hebrew).

14. A.Z. Halevy-Epstein, 'About Bnei Moshe', CZA A9/143-144 (in Hebrew).

15. Letter from Ahad Ha'am to S. Goldman, Kovno, 28 Elul 5649 (24 September 1889), in Ahad Ha'am, *Letters of Ahad Ha'am I* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1956), p. 1.

16. Ahad Ha'am, 'To Our Respected Brother and All Those with Him', 26 Shevat 5650 (28 January 1889), first published in *Bitsaron* 18 (1956/57), p. 118 (in Hebrew).

activists in Warsaw and Bialystok, and primarily young individual activists in other cities, its membership was almost completely inactive.

This period was also marked by dramatic shock waves within the Hibat Tsiyon movement, stemming from the Russian authorities' decision to formally recognize the movement and legalize its activities. This focused the attention of Hibat Tsiyon activists squarely on the founding congress of the Odessa Committee (the full name of which was 'The Society for the Support of Jewish Farmers and Artisans in Syria and Palestine', but which was commonly known as the 'Ofessa Committee'), the new organizational structure that was supposed to replace Hibat Tsiyon, which was scheduled for 19–25 April 1890.¹⁷ During this period the 'inattention to Bnei Moshe' intensified.¹⁸ The ideological debates that took place among its members in this context were also indicative of the fact that the order had not met the expectations of its founders and began to undermine the authority of its leadership in general and Ahad Ha'am in particular.

Even the location of Bnei Moshe's founding congress became a bone of contention, with five bureaus (to distinguish itself from the Hibat Tsiyon movement, the order referred to its branches as *leshakhot*, or 'bureaus', as opposed to *agudot*, or 'associations') requesting to convene in Warsaw and three in Odessa. As a result, the Bnei Moshe leadership in Odessa was unable to hold the group's founding conference at the end of its 'year of preparations' as planned, due both to the lack of clarity regarding its location and to the convening of the founding congress of the Odessa Committee, as everyone at the time was 'occupied with preparations for the day to come, the day of the Lovers of Zion meeting'.¹⁹ Another reason for the delay, which was perhaps more challenging and problematic than the others, was the fact that each congress attendee would 'arrive with his own doctrine'.²⁰ This, it was felt, would result in a 'division of opinion', making 'all our work in vain'.²¹ In other words, members of the leadership in Odessa feared that the challenge to the ideology they had adopted was underlaid by a rejection of the new order's authority to lead.

17. 'Minutes of the Meeting of Hibat Tsiyon Delegates in Odessa', CZA A9/18/1 (in Hebrew).

18. Letter from Ahad Ha'am, 2 Nisan 5650 (23 March 1890), CZA A34/147 (in Hebrew).

19. Ibid.

20. Letter from Ahad Ha'am, 'To Our Respected Brother', p. 118.

21. Ibid.

At the beginning of the winter of 1890, when it was clear to the Bnei Moshe leadership in Odessa that it would be unable to assemble the heads of the order at that time, its members resolved to take advantage of the arrival in the city of some bureau leaders for the founding congress of the Odessa Committee for consultations regarding how to proceed. Indeed, a few members of Bnei Moshe who happened to be in Odessa for the occasion met secretly to discuss the order's future. However, instead of settling the rifts between its leaders, these discussions actually deepened the divisions. The challenge to the authority of the leadership in Odessa emerged prominently during the gathering, as it became evident that the ideology they had formulated, which was based primarily on the principles delineated by Ahad Ha'am in 'This Is Not the Way' and another booklet titled 'The Way of Life',²² was unacceptable to some members of the order, most prominently those with Orthodox views, most of whom lived outside of Odessa. More fundamentally, however, the challenge to the status of the Odessa leadership also stemmed from the relative lack of success of the discussions of the Odessa Committee; and the Bnei Moshe leadership, it turned out, included some who wished to strip them of their powers. A circular sent by Ahad Ha'am to the members of the order, which was actually written by Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky and Yehoshua Eisenstadt (Barzilai), claimed that 'three different factions have formed in our organization', and that the disagreements between them had brought Bnei Moshe to the brink of 'total destruction'.²³ This challenge to the authority and status of the leadership in Odessa served as another reason to delay the order's intended congress, as its leaders believed that the differences regarding its platform and leadership would be resolved within a few months and therefore decided to put off the conference for half a year, from Adar 5650 (February–March 1890) to 15 Av 5650 (30 July 1890), and to hold it in Warsaw. Next, the leadership in Odessa asked that, during the time remaining before the congress, the members of Bnei Moshe decided on the ideological direction they would follow from that point onward. To this end, they sent a circular to each member of the order outlining the three alternatives that had crystallized by that point. The first was the original path of Ahad Ha'am, according to which Bnei Moshe would strive to warm the hearts of the People to its own nationality, making the 'national programme'

22. Ahad Ha'am, 'The Way of Life', CZA A35/1 (in Hebrew).

23. Circular from Odessa, 28 Sivan 5650 (16 June 1890), CZA A35/1 (in Hebrew).

the ‘property of the People and the national effort the effort of the People’. Until this happened, the circular maintained, they would ‘not succeed in doing great things in Eretz Israel’.²⁴ The two other alternatives presented to the members of Bnei Moshe were calls for change that would completely alter the character of the order. One of these alternatives, proposed by the Orthodox group supported by Hirschberg, Mohilever’s loyal representative from Bialystok, and supported by order members from the Orthodox centre in Vilna, would require the heads of the order to strive to strengthen the ‘spirit of religion’. According to this proposal, ‘our Torah’ was ‘the source of life’, and national concerns were relegated to ‘secondary importance’ and entirely dependent on the Torah. Another element of this proposal was termination of the right of the centre in Odessa under Ahad Ha’am’s leadership to demarcate the path of the order, based on the assertion that the need for this leadership was ‘not great’.²⁵ Indirectly, this clause of the proposal was meant to do away with the special status of the order’s founders. The third alternative, which received the backing of the supporters of Lilienblum – who in the meantime had become Ahad Ha’am’s sworn rival – among the Bnei Moshe membership, called for the dismantling of the order, its merger with or absorption by the Odessa Committee, and the refocusing of its members’ efforts on the settlement of Eretz Israel.²⁶

From the perspective of the members of the Odessa bureau under the leadership of Ahad Ha’am, the acceptance by a majority of the Bnei Moshe membership of one of the two latter alternatives – the proposal of the followers of Mohilever or that of the followers of Lilienblum – would mean the order’s demise. They therefore called upon the membership to decide immediately which of the three proposals they supported and concluded that there was no reason to seek a compromise that would bridge the gap between the two camps (as desired by Eisenstadt and Avraham Eliyahu Lubarsky). The divisions within Bnei Moshe, they argued, ran so deep that the only choice they had at this point was to strive for immediate and unequivocal decision regarding the order’s ideological character. To this end, in April 1890 a circular was sent out to the more than 70 members who had joined the order, with the exception of the bureau in Odessa, asking recipients to decide whether

24. Ahad Ha’am [unsigned], ‘Raising the Question’, CZA A35/1 (in Hebrew).

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

Bnei Moshe should continue along its delineated path or whether its current framework should be dismantled. A few weeks after the circular was sent out, the order's leadership in Odessa summed up the responses of the members: in addition to the members of the office in Odessa, 30 members chose to continue along the path the order had charted until that point, whereas 20 chose the two other alternatives, 8 in favour of the approach of the Bialystok and Vilna bureaus and 12 in favour of the alternative proposed by the supporters of Lilienblum; 13 members expressed support for other compromise proposals, and approximately 20 members expressed no opinion at all.²⁷

The leadership in Odessa was satisfied with the decision of the majority. This was particularly true of Ahad Ha'am, who regarded it as a vote of confidence. They were now able to inform their membership that Bnei Moshe would continue operating according to the platform decided upon at the order's founding congress ('The Way of Life'), with no deviations and no compromises, and that only those who believed in this platform 'wholeheartedly and with internal consciousness'²⁸ could join. Nonetheless, in the months remaining before the congress, it was decided to clarify to the membership a number of principles that had not been sufficiently elucidated in the platform, and in this context Ahad Ha'am composed an addendum to 'The Way of Life'.²⁹ To a certain extent, some sections of this text ran counter to the principles that had been preached by Ahad Ha'am in 'The Way of Life', particularly those dealing with the issue of Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel. These sections stated that 'the land of our ancestors' was the 'supreme goal' of the order, and that until it was secured they needed 'to win over hearts and ingrain in them its name and its purpose'. Although the addendum once again established the order's ultimate goal as 'the revival of our People in the land of our ancestors', and maintained that the path chosen by the Hibat Tsiyon movement would have no chance of success as long as the national idea was not rooted in Jewish society, section 3 emphasized that the goal of Bnei Moshe was also 'to complete and rectify the deeds of others' in Eretz Israel 'in order to ... expand and glorify the settlement of the children of Israel ... on strong material, moral and national

27. Circular from Ahad Ha'am to 'Respected Brother', 5 Av 5650 (22 July 1890), CZA A35/1 (in Hebrew).

28. Ahad Ha'am, 'The Way of Life'.

29. Ahad Ha'am, 'Addenda to The Way of Life', in *The Complete Writings of Ahad Ha'am* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1949), pp. 440-41.

foundations'.³⁰ This section, then, reflected an element of change in the aims of Bnei Moshe vis-à-vis those initially formulated by the order's founders; no longer limited to preparing the hearts of the People for its national identity, its aims now also encompassed work in Eretz Israel.

Without a doubt, the change in the principles of the order reflected in the 'Addenda to The Way of Life' stemmed primarily from Lilienblum's major success in the establishment of the Odessa Committee. It was abundantly clear to the Bnei Moshe leadership in Odessa that their desire to maintain the order and compete with the new Committee required them to place greater emphasis in their platform and operations on the importance of Eretz Israel, as the aims of the Odessa Committee were all directed towards this purpose. As individuals with political pretensions, the Bnei Moshe leadership understood that the success of Lilienblum and his associates had resulted in a decline in their initial momentum of expansion. If they now refrained from making an ideological change and retained a platform that appeared to be at odds with the principle of the Odessa Committee, their standing would decline even further. The order's leadership in Odessa planned to submit the 'Addenda to The Way of Life' to the attendees of the congress in Warsaw for their approval. In a circular sent out to the heads of the bureaus of Bnei Moshe, they announced that the congress would engage in the official establishment of the order, in addition to the 'formulation of a general programme and the selection of a permanent headquarters'.³¹ As agreed upon verbally in order to preserve the secrecy of the congress and its decisions, each bureau was asked to send only one delegate to the congress, and to ensure that this delegate was authorized to speak on behalf of its members and make decisions in their name.

An intellectual elite to lead the Jews

On 30 July 1890 (15 Av 5650), thirteen representatives of different bureaus of Bnei Moshe convened at the Warsaw home of Haim Cohen, a wealthy Bnei Moshe member. The Odessa bureau (Bureau 1) was represented by Eisenstadt, and the Jaffa bureau was represented by Eliyahu Ze'ev Lewin-Epstein from

30. Ibid.

31. Letter from Ahad Ha'am to 'My Dear Brother', 13 Elul 5650 (29 August 1890), CZA A24/70 (in Hebrew).

Warsaw, who, during this period, was supposed to leave for Eretz Israel as an emissary of the Menuha Venahela association. After each delegate took his oath and delivered a letter of power of attorney signed by the members of his respective bureau, the group got down to work. At the outset of the discussions, Eisenstadt delivered a report on developments within Bnei Moshe and asked the delegates to authorize the order's platform as articulated in 'The Way of Life' and 'Addenda to The Way of Life'. As expected, these documents were approved in full and without reservation.³² The assembly also decided that they would serve as an introduction to the order's 'book of regulations'.

The bulk of the congress discussions focused on the order's regulations. After the Odessa leadership's survey of the Bnei Moshe membership regarding the essence of the ideology guiding it and the decision of its members to adopt the formulations composed by Ahad Ha'am, it was clear to all in attendance that these foundations could be challenged no further. Prior to the congress, the order had already accepted the 'Addenda to The Way of Life' and was now only formally ratifying it. In contrast, the formulation of the order's regulations, which were meant to provide its members with guidance and specific instructions – regarding issues such as what to do, how to conduct themselves, and who would be responsible for the order's activity – was perhaps the opposition's last chance to influence the character of the order.

Indeed, a number of delegates with leanings towards the Orthodox members led by Mohilever, such as Hirschberg from the Bialystok bureau and Shmuel Pinchas Rabinowitz (also known as Shefer) from the Warsaw bureau, attempted to impose religious obligations on the members of Bnei Moshe. The majority of the delegates opposed this move, and, in a compromise of goodwill, it was decided to add a clause to the regulations that stipulated members' obligation 'to honour the religious laws according to which our brothers live in all the countries of their Diaspora'.³³ The clause in the regulations that was ultimately approved by the heads of Bnei Moshe, which called for respecting the Jewish religion and its customs, and for the willing, non-coerced acceptance of religious laws, was consistent with the world-view of the heads of the order from Odessa. This process repeated itself

32. 'Details of the Discussion', Warsaw Congress Protocol, CZA A35/9/1 (in Hebrew).

33. 'Book of Regulations' for activities of the organization, The National and University Library, Jerusalem (NUL) 4^o/791/188 (in Hebrew).

with the other clauses relating to the structure of the order and its activities in Eretz Israel, almost all of which were debated and ultimately compromised on by the conference delegates.³⁴ This dynamic may have benefited from the presence of Eisenstadt, who espoused opinions that differed from those of his colleagues in Odessa. His views on Eretz Israel were similar to those of Lilienblum (and equally as dissimilar to those of Ahad Ha'am), and, as a religious man, his views on religion were similar to those of Mohilever. In this way, as a representative of the leadership in Odessa, on the one hand, and a holder of views similar to the opposition, on the other hand, he was able to serve as a broker of compromise that was acceptable to both parties.

As expected, the conference selected Ahad Ha'am as the leader of the order (his title was changed from *nasi*, or 'president', to *rosh*, or 'head' of the association) and granted him almost unlimited powers. According to the regulations, the 'head' was 'the dominant force within the entire association'. The unlimited powers that the Warsaw conference bestowed upon Ahad Ha'am as 'head' of Bnei Moshe came in response to, and perhaps in compensation for, the undermining of his status, which began midway through the order's second year in existence, particularly since the establishment of the Odessa Committee. Now, he was crowned as the undisputed leader of Bnei Moshe. Equally as important was the fact that the ideology he wished to convey was accepted as the Guide for the Perplexed of the members of the secret order.

To work alongside Ahad Ha'am, it was decided to appoint five members (collectively referred to as the *'Aliya*) to serve as advisors, aides and confidantes of the leader. Their task was to 'observe all his actions and stand by his side in seeking the correct path'. As the 'head' of the order, Ahad Ha'am was required to update *'Aliyah* members regarding the 'state of affairs' and to seek their advice 'regarding everything respectable'. He was also to do nothing to which all of his advisors objected. And when he did take action, it was to be consistent with the new regulations. The delegates in Warsaw also made other decisions aimed at providing direction for the subsequent activity of Bnei Moshe. One such decision had to do with how to accept a new 'brother' into the order, and stipulated that doing so required a two-thirds majority of the membership of the bureau in which the new member was to be active, as well as the approval of the bureau head and the leader of Bnei Moshe. This

34. Tchernowitz, *Bnei Moshe and Its Time*, p. 42.

clause was decided upon under the pressure of Bnei Moshe members from Odessa, who sought to prevent the wholesale acceptance of members who were not well suited for the order, as had occurred in the past. Primarily in order to prevent the repetition of ideological misunderstandings, Ahad Ha'am was empowered to delay the acceptance of new members. The congress also decided how to deal with members who resigned or were expelled from the order, once again based on lessons from the acceptance of new members during Bnei Moshe's first year of activity. In such cases, the former member would be required to return all documents related to the order, and, most importantly, would promise to refrain from revealing any of its secrets even after he ceased to be a member. Another resolution passed in Warsaw called for a reduction in membership dues, as it had become evident that the allocation of 2 per cent of a member's annual income initially decided upon was an unrealistic expectation. The assembly therefore resolved to reduce membership dues to 1 per cent of a member's 'household expenditures'. Members were also asked to contribute to special projects of the order, according to their ability to do so. In addition, the meeting instituted new arrangements for the transfer, collection and distribution of funds and determined that only half of a bureau's income would be placed at its own disposal, and that the remainder would be transferred to the *'Aliyah* (Ahad Ha'am in Odessa), which would decide how to use it. To address greater local needs and the need for additional funds, the bureaus would establish emergency funds to be used solely in such situations.

It was decided that the five advisors of the *'Aliyah* would be selected from the order's larger bureaus and would serve as Ahad Ha'am's deputies. On this basis, already selected for these positions were Ravnitzky from Odessa, Haim Cohen from Warsaw, and Ze'ev Gorland from Vilna. The representatives of the Jaffa and Bialystok bureaus were to be chosen by their bureau members at a later date.³⁵ The congress also determined that from then on, these five bureaus would hold greater importance than the other bureaus. On a structural level, the conference established the internal hierarchy within the bureaus, each of which was to be headed by a leader elected for a one-year term by no less than five 'brothers', the minimal number of members that could establish a bureau. A deputy leader would also be selected from among

35. Letter from Ahad Ha'am to 'My Dear Brother', 13 Elul 5650 (29 August 1890), CZA A24/70 (in Hebrew).

the bureau members, as would a secretary, who would be responsible for the contributions made to the order and their conveyance to Bnei Moshe headquarters in Odessa.³⁶ The final section of the new regulations stipulated that the order's next general assembly would convene three years after its formal establishment on 15 Av 5653 (28 July 1893). The Warsaw conference also decided to terminate Ahad Ha'am's direct responsibility for the Odessa bureau (Bureau 1) by stipulating that the head of the order could not simultaneously serve as a bureau head, and Ravnitzky, a loyal Ahad Ha'am associate, was appointed in his stead. In this way, Ahad Ha'am sought to relieve himself of his numerous duties within Bnei Moshe and to concentrate on running the order as a whole.

Among other things, he sought to launch a renewed struggle over the path of the Lovers of Zion. A first step in this effort was an article titled 'The Priests and the People', which he authored and published in *Hamelits* on 19 September 1890. In this article, which criticizes the path of the Lovers of Zion and provides justifications for his own ideas, Ahad Ha'am was informing the Lovers of Zion of the establishment of the order (of course without explicitly mentioning its existence), which was meant to serve as an intellectual elite to lead the Jews towards the fulfilment of their national goals. This article, along with the sentiments of the leadership of Bnei Moshe following the congress, shows that in spite of everything they regarded themselves as the potential successors of Lilienblum, Pinsker and their associates – the past leaders of Hibat Tsiyon and the present leaders of the Odessa Committee. Although reality proved that, when forced to compete, the veteran leaders of Hibat Tsiyon were still strong and remained the senior leaders of the movement, the members of Bnei Moshe, in the summer of 1890, believed that their failure was only temporary. Despite the political defeat they had suffered and their differences of opinion with the veteran leaders of Hibat Tsiyon, they could no longer be ignored in the future.

Within a short period following the Warsaw congress, Bnei Moshe's membership grew to include more than 130 'brothers' throughout the Pale of Settlement and Eretz Israel. The bureau in Jaffa developed quickly, and the order was joined by prominent political actors within the country's organized Jewish-Zionist community. The Jaffa bureau, which its members referred to

36. 'Details of the Discussion', Warsaw Congress Protocol, CZA A35/9/1 (in Hebrew).

as 'The Way of Life', emerged as the largest bureau of Bnei Moshe, and the bureaus in Warsaw and Vilna expanded as well.³⁷

Conclusions

In the summer of 1890, then, the order of Bnei Moshe grew increasingly attractive. Many joined its ranks, and even more were rejected.³⁸ Ahad Ha'am became the order's undisputed leader, and the question that repeatedly arose was when Bnei Moshe would succeed in constituting an alternative to the Odessa Committee. At the end of the summer, it appeared that this would happen quickly. It was also clarified that from that point on Bnei Moshe would be compelled to adopt monolithic ideological positions. The order's platform would consist solely of the ideas of Ahad Ha'am as articulated in 'This is Not the Way', 'The Way of Life' and 'Addenda to The Way of Life'. The efforts of some Bnei Moshe members, with leanings towards the Orthodox of Bialystok and Vilna and the followers of Lilienblum in Odessa, to introduce other principles ended in failure. The failure of the Orthodox faction confirmed the rumours regarding the order's image as viewed through the eyes of the people, although no such intention existed among the order's enlightened intellectuals (*maskilim*) or secular members. From this point on, Bnei Moshe served as a symbol of the secular stream within Hibat Tsiyon. From a historical perspective, this was a major milestone in the history of the order and, more significantly, in the socio-cultural history of the Jewish people in the modern era.

37. In addition to the members of Bnei Moshe in Jaffa who were initially accepted by Eisenberg (Ze'ev Belikind, Isaac Ben-Tovim and Pines), the order was also joined by other individuals, such as teacher Yehuda Grazovsky, political activist Baruch Ladizhansky, young chemist Meir Dizengoff and physician Dr Menachem Stein, in addition to Eisenstadt and Lewin-Epstein, who arrived in Eretz Israel during this period. Even before the congress, the founders of the group in Warsaw – Matitياهو Cohen, Haim Cohen, Ze'ev Gloskin and Eliezer Kaplan – had been joined by a few other political activists, most prominently author and publicist Shmuel Pines Rabinowitz (Shefer), who quickly emerged as the most prominent member of the branch (which adopted the nickname Yeshurun), banker and political activist Zalman David Levontin and writer Ben-Avigdor (Avraham Leib Shalkowitch). The Vilna bureau (the Ezra bureau) also grew, as prominent activists such as the wealthy Isaac Leib Goldberg and writer and political activist Ze'ev R. Gorland were joined by members such as Arie Neischul, David Natik, Benzion Elisha, Shlomo Bielkriesky and others.

38. See, for example, Ahad Ha'am's letter to the Warsaw bureau, 17 Tishrei 5651 (1 October 1890), CZA A35/40 (in Hebrew), in which he asks whether he should accept publicist and prominent Hibbat Zion member Yaakov Slutsky.