

# **In the Face of Emergency: American Jewish Leadership and the Bergson Group, 1943**

*Yuri Keum*

## **Introduction: The Emergency**

by my death, I wish to give expression to my most profound protest against the inaction in which the world watches and permits the destruction of the Jewish people.<sup>1</sup>

Szmul Zygielbojm (1885-1943)

The Jewish representative of the Polish National Council in London, Szmul Zygielbojm, committed suicide shortly after the Bermuda Conference (April 19-30, 1943). The British-United States conference, held in an inaccessible location in Bermuda, confirmed that no immediate resolution would be reached regarding the plight of European Jewry under the Third Reich. Jews in Europe would not be saved from the “final solution”.

Two months before his suicide, Zygielbojm dispatched a telegram to American Jewish organizations, urging them to respond to the liquidation of ghettos and Nazi atrocities against Jews: “Only you can rescue us. Responsibility towards history thrown upon you.” Alarmed, American Jewish organizations, including religious establishments, gathered four days later (Pinsky 1983). They agreed on the urgent need for a new administrative body dedicated to the affairs of European Jewry under the Nazi regime, which led to the establishment of the Joint Emergency Committee on European Jewish Affairs (JEC). The representatives

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1 Szmul Zygielbojm's suicide note, retrieved from Yad Vashem Archives: [http://yad-vashem.org.il/about\\_holocaust/documents/part2/doc154.html](http://yad-vashem.org.il/about_holocaust/documents/part2/doc154.html).

elected to the new Committee were Rabbi Stephen Wise (American Jewish Congress), Judge Joseph M. Proskauer (American Jewish Committee), Adolph Held (Jewish Labor Committee), Henry Monsky (B'nai B'rith), and Israel Goldstein (Synagogue Council of America).

Despite a shared sense of emergency, JEC activities were conducted with little unity and efficiency, as persistent discord arose among the representatives. From committee membership to tactics for raising awareness of Nazi violence, no decision could be made smoothly and without time-consuming, internecine conflicts. Most representatives were particularly concerned about Wise, whose authority was presumed but had to be contested in order to ensure their equal footing in the committee (Ibid.). Wise was founder of the American Jewish Congress and a chairman of the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA), the United Palestine Appeal (later with Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver), and the World Jewish Congress (with Nahum Goldmann). Born in Budapest in 1874 and immigrating to New York as a child, Wise was an ardent Zionist, unlike most American reform rabbis at the time. He was also the spokesperson for American Jewry vis-à-vis President Roosevelt, and a major proponent of *shtadlanut*, quiet lobbying by a handful of influential Jews opposite their host administration (Pinsky 1983; Medoff 2015).

Membership of the Hadassah organization (the women's auxiliary to the ZOA) in the JEC was vetoed by the majority of representatives in order to limit Wise's influence, and a proposal to conduct mass rallies was met with disputes regarding their potential framing and public reach. Above all, while Wise's organizations were entirely committed to Zionist enterprises in-line with the Biltmore Program (1942),<sup>2</sup> the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish

2 Also known as the Biltmore Conference, the Biltmore Program was established at the Biltmore Hotel in May 6-11, 1942, with over 600 delegates and prominent Zionist leaders from 18 countries. It declared solidarity with the Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, alliance with the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem, support for the Yishuv in Palestine, and faith in the Balfour Declaration and the "Jewish Commonwealth" in Palestine. The Biltmore Program was to serve as the blueprint for the American Zionist establishment, but would also be another source of ongoing internal friction within American Zionist circles

Labor Committee, among others, were at odds with Zionism if not downright against it (Pinsky 1983).<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, the JEC planned public demonstrations and carefully drafted rescue proposals for the upcoming Bermuda Conference. Consolidating the proposals was a daunting and delicate task, as the JEC was extremely cautious not to condemn the Roosevelt administration in any deliberate way. The proposals had to correspond with a collective American war effort while expressing a particular sense of emergency regarding European Jewry. A three-page document was finally drafted and submitted by the JEC, beginning with a précis titled “Systematic Mass Extermination of Jews”. The rescue proposals called for “a planned program of determined action”, which was followed by an “Appendix to the Program for the Rescue of Jews from Nazi Occupied Europe” (Pinsky 1983: 487-488).

Much to the dismay of the JEC and the American Jewish community at large, the Bermuda Conference turned out to be a “sham” that tactically discussed the post-war relocation of refugees only, with no specific mention of European Jewry.<sup>4</sup> The JEC’s request to meet with Roosevelt

(Heney L. Feingold, “Was There Communal Failure? Some Thoughts on the American Jewish Response to the Holocaust,” *American Jewish History*, Centennial Issue I, 81, 1 (1993), pp. 60-80.

- 3 The American Jewish Committee, which consisted of a small number of established “uptown” German-Jewish elites, was notably anti-Zionist. Judge Proskauer’s joining the Wise-led JEC was met with complaints from members of the American Jewish Committee; he had to defend and justify his decision, which he did by emphasizing the escalation in Europe. For more on organizational dynamics and internal disputes in the JEC, see Pinsky, “Jewish Unity during the Holocaust” and David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945*, Pantheon Books, New York 1984.
- 4 The American delegation was led by president of Princeton University Harold Willis Dodds, and consisted of members with no background in immigration policy (e.g., Senator Scott Lucas of Illinois), known anti-Semites (e.g., Robert B. Reams from the State Department), and astute politicians pursuing careers in the State Department (e.g., Sol Bloom, the Chairman of House Foreign Affairs). The appointment of the American delegation strongly implies the State’s unwillingness to engage with the issue at hand. For more, see

and discuss the proposals was not granted. No Committee representatives were allowed to participate in (or even observe) the Bermuda Conference, where their rescue proposals were quickly dismissed. The Bermuda Program included recommendations not to negotiate with Hitler during wartime (thereby confining European Jews to Nazi-occupied areas); to favor Britain's suggestion of relocating refugees (only those safe already in Spain and Portugal) to Cyprus and North Africa; to revive the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (a product of the 1938 Evian Conference that had proven to be incompetent); and for Britain and America to share "neutral shipping" for the *post-war* transport of refugees.<sup>5</sup> With no plans for a rescue operation or broader immigration policy in sight, the Bermuda Program was heavily criticized as a "program of inaction" and "a cruel mockery."<sup>6</sup>

JEC efforts became futile when faced with the self-interest of two powerful entities, Britain and America, which were already determined to confine the refugee issue to Europe. When the news from Bermuda became public, Zygielbojm acutely understood the impending doom: "The latest news [of the Bermuda Conference] indicates beyond any doubt that Germans are now murdering the last remnant of the Jews in Poland with unbridled cruelty."

### The Bergson Group and the Conflict

Unbeknownst to Zygielbojm, a small group of foreigners in America had decided not to wait for organizational action regarding the rescue

Monty Noam Penkower, *The Jews were Expendable: Free World Diplomacy and the Holocaust*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago 1983; Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*; and Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry 1933-1945*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1987.

- 5 "Bermuda Conference," Yad Vashem Archives, "From Evian to Bermuda," Hillel Kook Collection (hereinafter: HKC), 13, pp. 15-27. [http://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206001.pdf](http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206001.pdf).
- 6 "Why was Bermuda a 'Cruel Mockery'?" *The Answer*, June 4, 1943, *ibid.*, 12, p. 82.

plans. Their leader Hillel Kook, also known as Peter Bergson,<sup>7</sup> had been a “haunted man” ever since the murderous rampage against European Jews was confirmed and publicized in November 1942 (Wyman 1984; Rapoport 1999). The Bermuda Conference was yet another blow. While reactions to the Conference ranged from disappointment to despair, Kook and his group – known as the “Bergsonites” or the “Bergson Group” after his alias – treated it as the ultimate catalyst for making the rescue of European Jewry their top priority.

Kook, nephew of the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Mandatory Palestine Abraham Isaac Kook, was born in present-day Lithuania in 1915, moved to the British Mandate of Palestine with his family in 1924, and received a religious education in Afula and Jerusalem. A relentless advocate for a Jewish army and a formidable “agitator” of the American Zionist establishment, he arrived in the United States in 1940 via the *SS Scythia* to lead the Irgun Delegation. Kook graduated from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he became involved in the Revisionist Movement led by Ze’ev Jabotinsky and met the like-minded David Raziel and Avraham Stern. Arab riots prompted his allegiance to Jabotinsky’s philosophy, which stressed strong military power alongside diplomatic efforts in the international arena to secure Jewish sovereignty in Eretz Israel. Kook, Raziel, and Stern joined the pre-state Haganah, but when Arab riots broke out, the three comrades of Jabotinsky’s Revisionist Zionism dissented from the Haganah to help establish the Irgun Zvai Leumi (National Military Organization, abbreviated in Hebrew as “Etzel”), a paramilitary underground group that would pose long-standing opposition to the organized Ben-Gurion-led Yishuv.<sup>8</sup> Kook was initially sent to the United States to support the

7 While various sources state that the pseudonym was assumed so as “not to embarrass” his family (in reference to his uncle, Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook), the name was adopted in order to protect his family in Mandatory Palestine, as Hillel Kook was targeted by British authorities for his Irgun activities (based on an informal interview with Dr. Becky Kook, daughter of Hillel Kook, conducted December 21, 2015).

8 Initially, the Irgun was known as the “Haganah Bet”, and Stern later split from the Irgun and formed another paramilitary group (1940), Lehi, commonly

clandestine “af-al-pi” (Hebrew for “despite”) immigration to Mandatory Palestine in response to the infamous “White Paper (1939)”, and to raise awareness on the issue of Jews’ “right to fight” (i.e., the establishment of the Committee for a Jewish Army, 1942).

He was such an indefatigable fund-raiser and captivating spokesperson that the American Zionist establishment and prominent Rabbi Stephen Wise in particular, became alarmed and tried vigorously to discredit the Bergsonites. Wise’s pre-existing enmity toward Jabotinsky and militant Zionism extended to Kook, and Kook’s activities and growing network intensified his hostility toward the Bergson Group. Wise was particularly upset to learn that Ben Hecht, an established playwright and part of the Hollywood elite, had joined the Bergson Group. He tried to persuade Hecht to withdraw from the Bergsonites, imploring him to join his own circle instead. His efforts proved unsuccessful, and Hecht did not hesitate to express his discontent with Wise (Rapoport 1999). Kook and Hecht, on the other hand, shared mutual respect and were inspired by one another from their first encounter, forging a lifelong friendship.<sup>9</sup> Their strong fraternal bond was also reflected by the widely successful dramatic pageants *We Will Never Die* (1943)<sup>10</sup> and *A Flag Is Born* (1946).<sup>11</sup> Hecht’s membership marked a breakthrough in the small foreign group’s influence in America.<sup>12</sup>

referred to as the Stern Gang. Both the Irgun and Lehi were formally dissolved and integrated into the Israeli Defense Forces in the course of the Independence War (1948). See Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1996, pp. 260-270.

- 9 Rapoport (*Shake Heaven & Earth*) notes the glowing impression and strong chemistry between Kook and Hecht in detail; the lasting friendship between the two was confirmed by an informal interview with Dr. Becky Kook (December 21, 2015).
- 10 Working manuscripts were fact-checked with Hillel Kook and Eri Jabotinstky, March 30, 1943, HKC, 1, pp. 172-173.
- 11 Complete scripts of *We Will Never Die* and *A Flag Is Born* are available at *ibid.*, 31.
- 12 Through close connection and cooperation with Ben Hecht, Kook extended his VIP list of celebrities to include the composer Kurt Weill; the established illustrator Arthur Szyk; Hollywood stars Jerry Lewis, Dean Martin, and

The emergency in Europe did not deter Wise's animosity toward Kook, but rather escalated it. From mid-1943 to early 1944, Kook's activities focused solely on the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People, which put the Committee for a Jewish Army on hold and vehemently pushed for a government agency to save European Jews. Toward that end, the Bergson Group held a conference under the self-explanatory title, "The Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People of Europe". Wise, however, persisted in his efforts to undermine the Bergson Group and sabotage the Emergency Conference – going as far as opposing the Gillette-Rogers Resolution<sup>13</sup> and making a (failed) attempt to have Kook deported.

Considering the fatal circumstances in Europe, which had been widely known in America since late 1942, Wise's "obsession" with the Bergson Group during these pivotal years is a highly charged matter.<sup>14</sup> What did the Bergsonite Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People entail, and why did the animosity between Wise and Kook escalate in the face of the emergency? Based primarily on a content analysis of archival

Frank Sinatra; and the musician-composer Leonard Bernstein.

- 13 This resolution, formulated as a result of the Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People of Europe (July 1943), is referred to by various names in scholarly literature: the Rescue Resolution, Gillette-Rogers Resolution, Gillette-Taft-Rogers Resolution, Baldwin-Rogers Resolution, and so on. While there seems to be no unified name for this specific Resolution in archival documents, the Resolution is in fact a combination of two identical resolutions: Resolution 203 (in the Senate) and Resolution 352 (in the House of Representatives). The former was led by Senator Guy Gillette of Iowa and the latter by Representative Will Rogers Jr. of California; both were submitted on the same day (November 9, 1943). This paper refers to the two resolutions, 203 and 352, by the names of their leading submitters as the Gillette-Rogers Resolution, or as "the Resolution", to avoid confusion. See HKC, 13, pp. 116-119.
- 14 The American Jewish Committee, Jewish Labor Committee, and religious organizations were not as concerned about the Bergson Group, and Hadassah was even sympathetic to the cause of a Jewish army; it was the American Jewish Congress and the ZOA (affiliated with the World Zionist Congress), headed by Rabbi Wise, which persistently attacked the Bergsonites in an "obsessive" fashion (Rapoport, *Shake Heaven & Earth*).

documents provided by the Hillel Kook Collection (HKC),<sup>15</sup> this article offers an in-depth examination of the Bergson Group's Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People of Europe (July 20-25, 1943) by comparing it to the Wise-led American Jewish Conference (August 29-September 2, 1943).

The significance of the Emergency Conference as a case study lies in its isolation of the rescue issue, thereby highlighting stark opposition between Wise and Kook that extended beyond ideological differences (e.g., labor and militant Zionism). By offering a case analysis of the Bergsonite Emergency Conference and its relation to the American Jewish Conference, this article seeks to contribute to existing literature and public debates that do not engage in historical hindsight and the discourse of "missed opportunities". The following archival examination casts light on the extraordinary endeavor of a small foreign group in America to rescue doomed Jews in Europe; in parallel, it rebukes the legacy of American Jewish "inaction" regarding the Holocaust by pointing to critical sociohistorical context.

### The Debate: American Jewry, the Bergson Group, and the Holocaust

Scholars have long been scrutinizing the domestic and international political climates to conceptualize American Jewish responses to the Holocaust and the position of the Bergson Group in instigating rescue efforts. Henry Feingold's analysis in *The Politics of Rescue* (1970), Monty Noam Penkower's *The Jews Were Expendable: Free World Diplomacy and the Holocaust* (1983), and Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut's *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945* (1987) represent a few of the early, classical, extensive studies on the subject. These analyses stress the power relations and realpolitik of the West and majority-minority dynamics in 1930s and 1940s America. Within this larger context, the schism between Wise and Kook was hardly relevant as an influence on the atrocities in Europe, and the rescue efforts of both Wise and Kook were bound to be fruitless.

15 The Hillel Kook Collection (HKC) is located in the Ben-Gurion Archives, <http://in.bgu.ac.il/en/bgarchives/Pages/default.aspx>.



Feingold explains the role of American State Department officials (notably Breckinridge Long, responsible for issuing visas) in hindering the implementation of expanded immigration policies and rescue efforts for European Jewry. No less significant are the sociopolitical characteristics of 1940s America: prevalent nativism, economic recession, and isolationism paired with anti-immigrant sentiment. The concurrent rise of domestic antisemitism placed American Jewish leaders in a peculiar position as they sought to save the lives of their European brethren. Given the indifference and reluctance expressed by Roosevelt himself, the rescue battles of American Jewish organizations were destined to be futile: “Given the circumstances, American Jewry seemed bound to fail” (1970: 324). Penkower, too, highlights the West’s unwillingness to intervene in the refugee crisis, arguing that both American Jewry and the Bergson Group “could do no more in the war years than besiege Washington regularly and hope that some understanding would result in action” – which both Wise and Kook did diligently, regardless of their different approaches (1983: 147, 286-288). Breitman and Kaut (1987) conducted a thorough and detailed analysis of bureaucratic webs, rigidly imposed immigration policies, and America’s narrowed and isolationist war interests, all of which were supported by public opinion in the 1940s and stood to interrupt grassroots rescue efforts.

Yehuda Bauer, a renowned scholar and a pioneer of Holocaust studies, shares a similar view with the aforementioned scholars but differs critically with regard to the State Department. According to Bauer, the American government was incompetent (rather than indifferent) to shift the course of the European Jewish catastrophe: “Jews were powerless, and so was the U.S., to stop the murder” (2012: 67). He persuasively argues that the economic crisis (i.e., the Depression) was Roosevelt’s priority; moreover, although news of violence did reach America, no one was capable of grasping the unthinkable magnitude of the Holocaust, which was revealed after the war. Both Wise and Kook did act, Bauer claims, but it was never up to them or the Roosevelt administration to intervene in the violence erupting in Europe.

Bauer (2012; 2014) pithily opposes “Wyman, Medoff and others” whose erudite studies of the subject draw utterly different conclusions than his own: more could have been done in terms of political awareness

and Jewish unity. The scholarly work of David S. Wyman (1984), for example, postulates that American Jewish organizations and the Bergson Group could have played a more active role vis-à-vis the Roosevelt government and the catastrophic news from Europe. Thus, his most well-known and distinguished work, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945* (1984), begins with a different question: “Why did America fail to carry out the kind of rescue effort that it could have?”<sup>16</sup>

Wyman’s contentions are threefold. First, like Feingold, Penkower, Breitman, and Kraut, he observes that the Roosevelt administration actively frustrated rescue efforts due to nativism and antisemitism as well as fear of communism. Second, Wyman asserts that American Jewish leaders failed to prioritize the refugee crisis and were instead consumed by internal disputes and power struggles during those critical years. Finally, Wyman is convinced that the exceptional and correct approach was that of the Bergson Group, as it was the Bergsonite Emergency Committee that made the “most crucial move” by formulating the Gillette-Rogers Resolution, which hastened the establishment of the War Refugee Board (1984: 155):

The fact that the tiny Bergsonite faction accomplished what it did toward the establishment of the War Refugee Board is compelling evidence that a major, sustained, and united Jewish effort could have obtained the rescue board earlier and insisted on its receiving greater support than it did. Such an effort could have drawn on substantial strengths (1984: 328).

Although historiographical interpretations cannot fundamentally answer “what if” questions, Wyman provides an exhaustive analysis of the activities of the Bergson Group, to which he gives the considerable credit of saving approximately 200,000 Jews via the War Refugee Board.<sup>17</sup>

16 Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, p. x; emphasis added.

17 David S. Wyman, “The Bergson Group, America, and the Holocaust: A Previously Unpublished Interview with Hillel Kook/Peter Bergson,” *American Jewish History*, 89, 1 (2001), pp. 3-34.

Introduced by Martin Gilbert, a distinguished historian and the author of *Auschwitz and the Allies* (1981), Louis Rapoport's *Shake Heaven and Earth* (1999) offers additional explication of the Bergsonite rescue activities. Though highly readable, comprehensive, and rich in detail, *Shake Heaven and Earth* posits a rather simplified dichotomy: Kook vs. Wise. According to Rapoport, Wise and other American Jewish leaders caused "great damage to the Jewish people," whereas Kook embodied the ethical imperatives befitting the agony of European Jews:

In the end, the politicians who make their careers in Jewish organizations did great damage to the Jewish people, while the Bergson group was piercing the silence around the extermination, transforming the face of Jewish politics, and bringing the requisite pressure to bear on an (at best) indifferent FDR. If the establishment organizations had done as much, hundreds of thousands more lives might have been saved (1999: 226).

Rapoport likens Wise to a "court Jew", driven by egotism, fear, and paranoia. Kook on the other hand, spearheaded rescue plans and acted against the "silence" of the West and the unjustified and virulent opposition of the American Jewish establishment.

Was Wise indeed a self-absorbed and irresponsible leader in the face of the emergency, implicitly sharing responsibility for the fate of Jews in Europe? Rafael Medoff's recent work attempts to explore this precise question. In *The Anguish of a Jewish Leader: Stephen S. Wise and the Holocaust* (2015), Medoff explores Wise's considerations and subsequent actions over the course of his career in America. During the emergency, Wise had two primary fears: the rise of domestic antisemitism and potential threat to his exclusive dominance over the American Jewish arena. The success of *We Will Never Die* and the media-savvy Kook made the Bergson Group a threat to Wise; for instance, Medoff describes a gathering between Kook, Wise, and Proskauer in 1942, in which Wise vied for Kook to withdraw a media campaign that was, according to him, a latent "recipe for Jewish pogroms in the USA" (2015: 91).<sup>18</sup> This

18 Initially, Kook responded positively on the condition that Jewish organizations would make the rescue issue their priority; once he saw that mainstream

was not a justified fear according to Medoff, as no such pogrom ever followed the Bergsonites' all-too-public activities.

Bergson Group activities had absolutely no prestige for Wise, even though their cause was to rescue Jews from the Third Reich (Medoff 2015). As far as he was concerned, "There was no possibility that the Bergson Group could play a legitimate role, since the Jewish Agency alone was the recognized spokesman of the Jewish people in all matters" (Ibid.: 100). In addition, Wise felt that the Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People was Kook's way of "stealing the thunder of the Joint Emergency Committee (JEC) and perhaps of the American Jewish Conference [scheduled in August 1943, a month after the Emergency Conference]" (Ibid.: 114). Medoff argues that Wise's loyalty to Roosevelt, and his deep-seated admiration of Britain for its rich culture and early affirmation of Zionism (i.e., the Balfour Declaration of 1917), further crippled his judgement, prompting him to disregard or bluntly ignore alternatives to his own course of action – and there were alternatives (Medoff 2015). Consumed with internal disputes (including his feud with the Bergson Group and later with Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver), Wise failed "to distinguish between hopes and reality, to speak truth to power, to translate privately expressed doubts about US refugee policy into concrete political action, and to step aside if he was no longer able to do so" (Ibid.: 166).

Along with Medoff's examination of American Jewish leadership in the 1940s, the extensive chronicle of the Bergson Group by Judith Tydor Baumel offers a highly valuable discussion of Kook's approach to the emergency and his efficiently strategized rescue campaigns. Baumel pays close attention to the Bergsonite's ability to generate publicity and Kook's tenacity as a leader. In *The "Bergson Boys" and the Origins of Contemporary Zionist Militancy* (2005), she dedicates an entire chapter to the activities of the Emergency Committee to Save the Jews of Europe and the War Refugee Board (Chapter 4, "A Time to Save":

American Jewish organizations were not giving the adequate attention to the rescue, he resumed the media campaign and intensified it (Medoff, *The Anguish of a Jewish Leader*, p. 91).

136-196). In it, Baumel expounds on the Bergsonites' shift of focus from a Jewish army to the rescue of European Jews; the success of the Emergency Conference, she contends, was mainly attributable to "the complete divorce of the rescue issue from the Palestine question" (2005: 194-195). Such "divorce," however, was inconceivable to American Jewish leaders as they "sincerely believed" that the sole solution for the Jewish refugee crisis was the "opening of the gates of Palestine to Jewish immigration" (Ibid.: 168). Wise saw the Gillette-Rogers Resolution as a failure formulated by "a handful of Jews and Christians" without a representative authority (Ibid.). According to Baumel, the American Jewish Conference may have been an "anti-Emergency Committee struggle" led by Wise (and Silver, who was embroiled in bitter competition with Wise in the American Zionist circle) in order to "liquidate" the Bergson Group in the American Jewish scene (Ibid.: 161-162).

As illustrated above, scholarly discussions on American Jewish leadership and the Bergson Group tend to employ a dichotomous framework (i.e., Kook vs. Wise) and, both implicitly and explicitly, focus on "missed opportunities" riddled with historical hindsight. Such discussions are essentially consequence-oriented. Despite their merits, they inevitably cloud the in-depth examination of events by focusing on the intentions of the actors themselves. Even Bauer, despite stressing the significance of the American socioeconomic and political complex in the 1930s and 1940s, promotes a result-centric approach: "The problem ... is not the usual one of inner-Jewish arguments about who did what, but – what was the result, and is the whole argument really relevant? What did the War Refugee Board achieve?" (2014: 231).

In hopes of contributing to the ongoing scholarly debate on the subject, this article offers a micro-perspective focused on the rescue effort itself rather than its outcome through a case study of the Emergency Conference, which eventually led to the submission of Gillette-Rogers Resolution for the establishment of the War Refugee Board. This examination ultimately deduces the underlying causes, not for the discontent between Kook and Wise and its relation to the larger context, but rather for the escalation of this discontent in the face of the emergency.

## The Emergency Conference, July 1943

Kook was devastated when the *Washington Post* (November 25, 1942) reported the shocking news: two million Jews had already been slaughtered, and their systematic extermination in Europe was well on its way. The nature and scale of violence against Jews were deplorable and unprecedented, undoubtedly distinct from the bitter yet familiar pogroms and sporadic persecutions (e.g., a blood libel) prevalent throughout Jewish history. The “cruel mockery” of the Bermuda Conference had taught the Bergson Group important lessons; the quiet lobby of American Jewish elites was ineffective (as was reliance on Western administrations), and strong public pressure was needed for urging the U.S. government to engage in rescue efforts (Wyman 1984; Rapoport 1999; Baumel 2005).

As an immediate response to the Bermuda Conference, the Bergson Group gathered signatures from over 1,800 prominent figures and elected officials toward the “Proclamation on the Moral Rights of the Stateless and Palestinian Jews” (May 1943).<sup>19</sup> The Proclamation emphasized Jews’ right to fight persecution and the anti-Christian character of Hitler, signed and endorsed by congressional representatives and senators.<sup>20</sup> Needless to say, the wide media coverage and support for the Bergson Group initiative frustrated Wise, who viewed the Bergsonites as “hooligans” who undermined the ZOA’s primacy in representing American Jewry. Despite the disapproval and oppositional activity of the Wise-led ZOA, the Bergson Group held a conference in July 1943 and published various advertisements on the peril of European Jewry, one of which asked: “How well are you sleeping when innocent men, women and children are being slaughtered?”<sup>21</sup>

19 “A Proclamation on the Moral Rights of the Stateless and Palestinian Jews,” HKC, 11, pp. 335-345; “A Proclamation on the Moral Rights of the Stateless and Palestinian Jews (Abridged),” *ibid.*, 14, pp. 92-99.

20 The Bergson Group made the mistake of publishing some names without consent, prompting a few to withdraw their public support; notably, Senator Harry S. Truman was enraged over the mistake, and despite Kook’s sincere apology, responded briefly to confirm the withdrawal of his name. See correspondence from Truman to Bergson, May 24, 1943, *ibid.*, 1, p. 200.

21 “How well are you sleeping? Is there anything you could have done to save

Interest and support poured in from prominent figures including former president Herbert Hoover, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (though indirectly), Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr., Senator Guy Gillette, Congressman Will Rogers Jr., and Secretary Cordell Hull, among others. The successful publicity was largely owed to the strategic shift the Bergson Group had made. The Group realized that in order to reach a wider audience (e.g., non-Jews, non-Zionist Jews, and Christians) – and efficiently generate public pressure for rescue (and rescue only) – the Emergency Conference had to appear nonsectarian, nonpartisan, candidly humanitarian, and essentially apolitical. In full commitment to the Emergency Conference and its conclusions, the Bergson Group renamed itself the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People.

“Stress Need of Speed to Save Jews in Europe,” read the headline published July 2, 1943 in New York, announcing the upcoming conference and notable participants such as Admiral Yates Stirling Jr., Secretary of Interior Harold L. Ickes (who refused to dissociate with Kook despite Wise’s advice),<sup>22</sup> and Herbert Hoover as one of the honorary chairmen of the Emergency Conference.<sup>23</sup> It was crystal-clear that the Emergency Conference was a direct response to the Bermuda Conference; unlike the latter, it would concern “potential corpses” rather than “potential refugees”.

On July 20, as the Conference opened at the Commodore Hotel in New York, the Committee distributed a document containing “Questions before the Conference” in order to direct the conference discussions.<sup>24</sup> The first question aimed to internationalize and universalize the issue, asking: “Does the Jewish disaster – the millions of Jewish dead and the millions more doomed – constitute a specific problem which requires the urgent moral, military, and diplomatic attention of the United

millions of innocent people – men, women and children – from torture and death? What are you doing now?” *ibid.*, 13, pp. 205-210.

22 Correspondence from Wise to Ickes, December 24, 1943, *ibid.*, 1, p. 249.

23 “Emergency Conference to Save Jews of Europe,” *Jewish Review New York*, July 15, 1943, *ibid.*, 12, pp. 102-103; “Plan is Outlined for Feeding Jews,” *New York Times*, July 23, 1943, *ibid.*, p. 128.

24 “Questions before the Conference,” *ibid.*, 13, p. 12.

Nations?” The second aimed to assess and criticize the American (and British) “policy of indifference” by asking: “Is the ‘wait-until-the-war-is-over’ attitude of the United Nations toward the Jewish disaster warranted? Or should something be attempted now in order to save countless lives threatened with ‘total extermination’?” The third question on the role of “the Church, International Labor Unions, and the international associations of authors and artists, and above all... the governments of the leading United Nations” called for the direct involvement of the non-Jewish world. Next, conference participants were asked to name “realistic possibilities” for moving Jewish refugees to Hitler’s “satellite governments” (e.g., the Balkan countries) in order to expand options of refuge beyond Palestine.

The Zionist disposition of the Bergson Group was implicit in the final two questions, without impeding on the objectives of the Emergency Conference. In response to the sixth question on “measures... to force the Nazis to stop the mass murder of European Jews”, the Bergson Group suggested a “suicide squad” of Jewish fighters that would infiltrate Nazi-occupied Europe, an idea all too familiar from the Jewish army. The final question further indicated the Bergson Group’s Zionist inclinations, implying the necessity of Jewish statehood: “What can be done, apart from practical relief and evacuation, to give hope and strength to the agonized Jewish people of Europe, to restore their dignity and honor as a people, to make them feel that they are partners in the global struggle for a better world, not merely helpless victims?”

The Zionism of the Bergson Group was more of an unspoken nuance than a subject of explicit discussion. Conference proceedings stayed impeccably true to the main cause; the Emergency Committee presented the historical background of the Evian and Bermuda Conferences with detail and erudition; shared expressions of disappointment from various media sources; and discussed the “shame before the future generations” that ignoring the magnitude of violence in Europe would cause. There were five parts to the diligently structured Conference: international relations, transportation and relief, military affairs, religion, and public opinion – all of which highlighted a shared sense of responsibility for rescue.<sup>25</sup>

25 “From Evian to Bermuda,” *ibid.*, pp. 16-27.



Interestingly, the mention of American Zionist organizations in the Bergsonite position paper suggested that the Emergency Committee somehow represented a consensus. The twelfth point of the paper concerned the importance of a refugee agency, stating: “This demand for the immediate creation of a United Nations Agency... was presented by the Zionist Organization of America, by the American Jewish Congress as well as by the Emergency Committee to Save European Jewry in which all the major Jewish organizations are participating.”<sup>26</sup> The Emergency Committee stressed that its demand for a refugee agency was not new but persistently sought after due to the severity of the matter, and in truth, the JEC had submitted similar resolutions (i.e., the JEC’s rescue proposals prior to the Bermuda Conference). On the other hand, the American Jewish Congress and ZOA were led by Wise, whose disapproval and animosity toward the Bergson Group could not have been more evident, and “all the major Jewish organizations” participating in the Emergency Committee were not specified.

In fact, those associated with the Emergency Conference and the Committee’s designated “advisors” were primarily the Bergsonites themselves (e.g., Peter Bergson, Eri Jabotinsky, Ben Hecht, and Samuel Merlin), a few Jewish and non-Jewish professionals in international relations and immigration, Christian clergymen (and Archbishop Athenagoras), eight rabbis, and a number of congressional representatives and other well-known politicians such as Herbert Hoover.<sup>27</sup> Not a single person involved in the Emergency Conference was indicated affiliation with the ZOA, the American Jewish Congress, or any other “major Jewish organizations”.

Approximately 1,500 people participated in and observed the Emergency Conference, and established figures successfully conducted their presentations in front of a driven and passionate audience.<sup>28</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt sent “a message of encouragement” that was read aloud, sending enthusiasm through the audience. Congressman Will Rogers Jr.

26 “A United Nations’ Agency,” *ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

27 “The Composition of the Conference,” *ibid.*, p. 80; “Executive Board,” *ibid.*, p. 98.

28 *The Answer*, August 1943, *ibid.*, 41, pp. 4-37.

underscored the failure of the Bermuda Conference participants: “The case of the world’s tortured Jews is a sharp and undeniable index of a combined incompetence, laxity, cruelty, and deliberate self-indulgence of the diplomatic policy of the United Nations, and we might as well put the blame where it belongs – on England and the United States.” The Bergson Group also managed to gain contribution from Dr. Y. C. Yang of China, the Secretary of the Chinese delegation to the League of Nations, who not only connected the issue to China (“China... a country which has suffered atrocities at the hands of the Nazis of the East, can well understand and appreciate the hard lot of the suffering Jews”) but also stressed the universal character of the cause (“We see a silver lining in the high ideal and solidarity among the United Nations and the growing consciousness of the oneness of the world and of mankind as a whole.”). He further expressed his support for the Emergency Committee, stating: “If there is anything we Chinese can contribute, either morally or materially, I am sure we will be more than happy and more than eager to do it.”

About two and a half months after the death of Zygielbojm, the Emergency Conference “corrected” the Bermuda Conference, promptly declaring its conclusions:<sup>29</sup>

The saving of the Jewish people of Europe constitutes a specific problem which should be dealt with as such, not as a part of the general refugee problem;

1. Most of the four million surviving Jews of Europe can be saved from annihilation without detriment to the successful prosecution of the war;
2. A specific governmental agency should be created for that purpose.

After the Conference, the Emergency Committee pushed forward by organizing the Rabbis’ March<sup>30</sup> and tirelessly lobbying congressional

29 “Findings and Recommendations of the Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People of Europe,” *ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

30 The Emergency Committee organized a Rabbis March to Washington in

members for the fulfillment of the conference conclusions. Finally, two Emergency Conference participants and supporters of the Bergson Group, Senator Guy Gillette and Congressmen Will Rogers Jr., agreed to submit resolutions to the Senate and the House of Representatives.

The two identical resolutions (Resolution 203 and Resolution 352), collectively referred to as the Gillette-Rogers Resolution or the Rescue Resolution, articulated three concise, penetrating points that were practically identical to the Emergency Conference conclusions: (1) the urgent situation of European Jewry, (2) the “American tradition of justice and humanity”, and (3) “a plan for immediate action” that would establish a refugee agency to rescue the remaining Jews in Europe.<sup>31</sup> Concurrently, the Emergency Committee published the names of Resolution supporters, which included Eleanor Roosevelt, Henry Morgenthau, “500 Rabbis”, prominent senators and congressional representatives, and officials of the Catholic Church. The Church stated:

As Christians and as Americans, we urge the passage of the Senate Resolution proposing the creation of a special governmental commission to find ways and means to save the surviving Jewish people of Europe. As Christians, how can we do less? As Americans, we recall our liberal tradition of the past. ...Let each door of refuge be opened and kept open. This is the Christian way.<sup>32</sup>

With extensive media coverage and “6000 churches” praying in solidarity,<sup>33</sup> public pressure on the Roosevelt administration was now substantial, seemingly foretelling the passing of the Resolution.

October 1943; most rabbis were from the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada, with over 400 participants. Roosevelt avoided meeting the rabbis, due partly to the advice of Rabbi Stephen Wise. See Rapaport, *Shake Heaven & Earth* and “The Washington Pilgrimage,” HKC, 14, pp. 51-53.

31 “Resolution 203” and “Resolution 352,” *ibid.*, 13, pp. 116-119. For a complete list of senators and congressmen behind the Gillette-Rogers Resolution, see 14, p. 60.

32 “The Church Appeals for the Resolution,” *ibid.*, p. 62.

33 “6000 Churches Prayed for Compassion in Connection with the Rabbis’ Pilgrimage,” *ibid.*, p. 63.

## The American Jewish Conference, August 1943

Frustrations ran high within the American Jewish establishment as the Emergency Committee posted the Resolutions in the Senate and the House of Representatives, especially as Wise, too, had been planning a conference since March 1943, scheduled for about a month after the Emergency Conference. Competitiveness and divisiveness were inevitable.

The Bergson Group was not solely responsible for this frustration, however. Internal discord accompanied planning for the conference from the outset. Zionist and non-Zionist divisions were exacerbated by Wise's uncompromising view of Palestine as the sole solution to the European Jewish problem (one he shared with Rabbi Silver), resulting in the withdrawal of the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Labor Committee (Penkower 1985; Feingold 1993). Moreover, Wise was embroiled in bitter rivalry with the young Rabbi Silver, who attacked him at the conference (August 29-September 2, 1943) for his moderate stance on the Roosevelt government and the Biltmore Program.

Despite their differences in opinion and personality, Wise and Silver shared their ultimate agendas in Palestine to advance the rescue effort (Feingold 1993). The Conference consolidated their positions with an emphasis on "rescue through victory" and heralded the phrase, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!" (Penkower 1985: 104).

By all accounts, the "unity" that the American Jewish Conference expressed was not a reality. In addition to being "caught-up in Wise's furor",<sup>34</sup> which led to the withdrawal of non-Zionist organizations, the American Jewish Conference released a scornful press release about the Emergency Conference. The Bergson Group, claimed the American Jewish Conference, consisted of "a small political party which had been in conflict with the constituted Jewish leadership," and

...instead of cooperating with established and recognized national Jewish agencies, they have entered into competition and sought to

34 American Jewish Conference, Yad Vashem Archives, [http://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205734.pdf](http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205734.pdf).

undermine them. Many men and women of good will, moved by humanitarian sympathy with the plight of the Jews of Europe, have been misled into believing that these committees represented the Jewish people and have contributed to their support.<sup>35</sup>

The issue of representation was not new, and the Bergson Group had indeed made the confusing statement in its position paper that “all the major Jewish organizations” were included in the Emergency Committee. The Emergency Conference employed “mistaken propaganda” that “would not save a single Jew”, declared the American Jewish Conference, further problematizing its heritage (i.e., the Jabotinskyian and Irgunite Committee for a Jewish Army).

More crucially, the American Jewish Conference sternly expressed its contempt for the Gillette-Rogers Resolution.<sup>36</sup> The reason for its opposition was threefold. First, the Resolution was formulated in “complete disregard of the rescue program which is being actively pressed in Washington by representative Jewish agencies”, although the advance of such a rescue program was not discernible, unless one supposes American Zionist leaders were conducting “backstage diplomacy”. Second, the Resolution was “limited” as it did not mention Palestine – a deliberate choice made by the Emergency Committee in order to reach wider audiences and focus solely on a rescue program. Finally, the American Jewish Conference insisted that the Emergency Committee aimed to forge “an open attack on the World Zionist Organization”, an accusation stemming from the Bergson Group’s heritage and traditional insubordination to American Zionist leaders. In December 1943, Wise stood before the House of Foreign Affairs Committee to disqualify the Gillette-Rogers Resolution as the initiative of “near-fascists” who had defied the authority of American Jewry and the World Zionist Organization.<sup>37</sup>

35 “Press Release from American Jewish Conference: American Jewish Conference Criticized ‘Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe’,” *HKC*, 13, pp. 144-147.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*

## The Gillette-Rogers Resolution

Once the Resolution was submitted (November 9, 1943), the role of the Emergency Conference was either ignored or praised. *The Jewish Chronicles*, *Jewish Post*, and *Jewish Review* disregarded the contributions of the Emergency Committee to the Resolution while advocating for its approval by the Senate.<sup>38</sup> Publications would discuss the Resolution without any mention of the Emergency Conference, one example being a particularly illuminating *B'nai Brith Messenger* editorial (November 12, 1943)<sup>39</sup> that welcomed the Resolution but mentioned only Rogers, Gillette, and the Swedish and Norwegian Jews being saved. Similarly, *The Jewish Record* (November 18, 1943)<sup>40</sup> chronicled the names of senators and congressional representatives who supported the Resolution while completely omitting the Emergency Committee and its input.

There were also instances of recognition and acknowledgment. The *Jewish Morning Journal* of New York (December 5, 1943) affirmed the Bergson Group's influence on the Resolution in an article by Jacob Glatstein titled "Simple and Clear". Glatstein writes (originally in Yiddish):

The Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe has certainly achieved much in arousing the conscience of the American people... Nor should it be overlooked that the Emergency Committee succeeded in finding friends among members of the House and Senate who are willing to help, and who realize that the American people now bear a great task and a deep responsibility.<sup>41</sup>

"Is Dr. Wise Right?" asked the daily *Jewish Courier of Chicago* (December 7, 1943) rhetorically, strongly criticizing Wise for "hindering the resolution". It acknowledged the objective of the Emergency

38 Clippings, HKC, 13, pp. 167-172.

39 "Congress Initiates Plan to Save European Jews," Editorial, *B'nai Brith Messenger*, November 12, 1943, *ibid.*, p. 168.

40 "Ask Congress to Create Specific Agency to Save Jewish People of Europe," Editorial, *Jewish Record*, November 18, 1943, *ibid.*, pp. 167-172.

41 Jacob Glatstein, "Simple and Clear," *The Jewish Morning Journal*, December 5, 1943, *ibid.*, pp. 191-192.

Committee and the agenda of the Bergson Group: “The Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe has made a public statement that the resolution in Congress to rescue the Jews of Europe has nothing to do with political questions about Palestine or other territories... This is to say that Dr. Wise has confused several issues which have no connection one with the other.”<sup>42</sup> Ohio’s *Every Friday* (December 10, 1943) also engaged in self-reflection and criticized Wise. It addressed the role of the Emergency Committee, stating: “We have to admit that the [Emergency] Conference to Save the Jewish People of Europe... stir[s] up public opinion in favor of the present resolution calling for immediate and special action.”<sup>43</sup>

Regardless of attitudes toward the Bergson Group, the Resolution itself was broadly supported and became one of the driving factors for the establishment of the War Refugee Board in January 1944 (Wyman 1984; Rapoport, 1999; Baumel 2005; Medoff 2015). Having already passed in the Senate (Resolution 203), it was due to be debated in the House of Representatives (Resolution 352). The passing of the Resolution was palpable, until Roosevelt preemptively announced Executive Order 9417 – thereby sideswiping the discussion on the Resolution in the House and precipitating the establishment of a governmental agency for refugees, which the Bergson Group had so determinedly pushed for.

Roosevelt was motivated by political considerations, as the forthcoming discussion in the House of Representatives prospectively bore critical embarrassment to his administration. Two proponents of the Bergson Group and Emergency Conference participants, Henry Morgenthau and John W. Pehle, would share their thorough investigations of bureaucratic inertia and questionable delay in the transfer of funds and other aids to Jewish refugees in Europe (Lipstadt 1990; Baumel 2005). Furthermore, in opposition to the Resolution, the assistant secretary in charge of issuing visas, Breckinridge Long – who had long sided with Wise against the Bergson Group – had made a fabricated statement on refugee

42 “Is Dr. Wise Right?” Editorial, *The Daily Jewish Courier*, December 7, 1943, *ibid.*, pp. 187-188.

43 “Too Much Fault Finding,” Editorial, *Every Friday*, December 10, 1943, *ibid.*, pp. 172-173.

admission to the United States, a blunt lie that was widely exposed, already causing embarrassment to the administration.<sup>44</sup> Both the investigations by Morgenthau and Pehle and Long's erroneous statement would be on the table in the upcoming debate in the House of Representatives. Conscious of public opinion in the face of approaching elections, Roosevelt made a calculated decision; he equipped himself with universal, humanitarian language and proclaimed the establishment of the War Refugee Board.<sup>45</sup>

The victorious moment prompted celebration within the Bergson Group, as the goal of Emergency Committee had now been realized. A day after the announcement of the War Refugee Board, Kook wrote Roosevelt (January 23, 1944) with overwhelming gratitude, praising democracy itself:

We raised the cry of our tortured and forgotten people. It may be that in our anguish, Mr. President, we sometimes raised our voice out of tune yet that too was understood and gave us renewed strength. These three years have taught us the meaning of democracy for the American people have heeded our cry and yesterday you, Mr. President, heeded them.<sup>46</sup>

The year 1944 marked Kook's fourth year in America. His letter of gratitude to the president was answered by Pehle, the first director of the War Refugee Board: "I assure you that everything in our power will be done to see that effective action is taken to carry out the policy of this Government to save the victims of enemy oppression who are in imminent danger of death."<sup>47</sup>

44 In opposition to the Resolution, Long supported a governmental commitment to the Bermuda resolutions and defended the American immigration policy, asserting that the majority of the 580,000 refugees admitted during the war years were Jewish. The actual numbers of issued visas and admitted refugees did not match Long's statement, and the discrepancies were exposed by the State Department. See more at Deborah E. Lipstadt, "America and the Holocaust," *Modern Judaism, Review of Developments in Modern Jewish Studies*, part 1, 10, 3 (1990), pp. 283-296 and Rapoport, *Shake Heaven & Earth*.

45 "An Historic Document," HKC, 14, p. 35; "America Acts: War Refugee Board," *ibid.*, 14, p. 43.

46 Correspondence from Bergson to Roosevelt, January 23, 1944, *ibid.*, 1, p. 254.

47 Correspondence from Pehle to Bergson, February 7, 1944, *ibid.*, p. 257.



## Discussion

Strained by its own operational problems and offering “too little too late”, the War Refugee Board eventually saved approximately 200,000 Jews from Europe (Wyman 1984). As mentioned, the Board was established through an array of correlated and intertwined factors, including the Gillette-Rogers Resolution, which the Emergency Committee pushed to bring under discussion in the House of Representatives. For the American Zionist establishment, however, the Bergson Group was a troubling entity, regardless of its noble cause. The emergency made both groups cling to their orientations and approaches, intensifying tension and disunity, a phenomenon that can be partly attributed to the imagined “establishment” of American Jewry.

One crucial sociological factor evident in JEC activities (in response to Zygielbojm’s telegram) and the American Jewish Conference is the characteristic division between American Jewish organizations. Such organizations multiplied due to linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity among Jewish immigrants. Furthermore, they adapted to individualistic and liberal American norms (i.e., became “Americanized”). The divisions had become a “norm”, particularly following the Great Migration of 1881, when two million Eastern European Jews immigrated to America. The established, well-to-do, “uptown” German Jews were extremely reluctant to support Jewish newcomers and, in some cases, openly opposed the mass immigration of their brethren from the Russian Empire (Howe 2001). All too prevalent were fear of domestic antisemitism, triggered by the visible presence of Yiddish-speaking, poverty-stricken, traditionally religious Jews; a sense of burden with regard to ensuring communal welfare; and general anti-immigration sentiment in-line with broader American society. Nonetheless, fraternal and philanthropic organizations were established to assist Eastern European Jewish immigrants, as exemplified by the American Jewish Committee, the Joint Distribution Committee, and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. Disinclined to be political, these philanthropic bodies and their successor organizations independently framed their directorial and operative structures and were largely inflexible when it came to cooperation (Feingold 1993).

The representative authority of American Jewish leaders (e.g., Wise) was shrouded in other peculiarities within the organizational makeup

of American Jewry during the 1940s. An editorial in *Common Sense* (March 1944) cogently describes the reality of the community on the ground: “The average Jew [in America] is likely to be unaware of, indifferent to, or puzzled by many of the pronouncements issued in his name.”<sup>48</sup> It states that five million Jews lived in America, one million were registered with a Jewish organization, and 25,000 of these were affiliated with Zionist organizations. Anti-Zionist organizations, too, made their voices heard; the American Jewish Committee withdrew from the American Jewish Conference due to the Palestinian agenda, for instance, and in response to the Rabbis’ March in October 1943, the American Council for Judaism released a public statement of opposition to Zionism, signed by approximately 100 Jews.<sup>49</sup>

The acute political, socioeconomic, and ideological stratification among American Jews in the 1940s made representing the entire five million an impossible task. Zionism appealed to a small segment of the American Jewish population that generally included the less wealthy and integrated, whose memory of the old country often remained intact (Peck 1980). Developed as an internal means of integration and networking, and stemming predominantly from *Landsmannschaften*,<sup>50</sup> this brand of Zionism did not call for a mass *aliyah* or interfere with the “American dream” (Shiff 1994; Howe 2001). It is likely that those who expressed staunch support of Jabotinsky and made considerable contributions to the Bergson Group were indeed members of several *Landsmannschaften* (Baumel 2005). Thus, put bluntly, American Jewish unity was nonexistent outside of the rhetoric and minds of antisemites.

There was, however, one issue that five million American Jews could all agree upon: the quick victory of the Allies over the Axis.<sup>51</sup> This was

48 “Speaks for the Jews?” *Common Sense*, March 1944, *ibid.*, 14, pp. 28-32.

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Landsmannschaften* refers to numerous small-scale benevolent communities that bonded members around birthplace and socioeconomic status. They flourished in early twentieth century America in particular, not only providing solidarity rooted in memories of the old country, but also sharing information to support their members’ integration into broader American society.

51 “Speaks for the Jews?” *Common Sense*, March 1944, HKC, 14, pp. 28-32.

the bottom-line, cohesive American reaction to the war, and its all-encompassing Americanness provided a broad common denominator in moments of protest regarding Jews in other parts of the world. When American Jews organized demonstrations in response to the Kishinev Pogrom (1903), they forged an alliance with the Christians and emphasized their “brotherhood”; the demonstrations had no impact on the distant Jewish victims but rather evoked solidarity within the United States, boosting American Jews’ sense of moral achievement and self-affirmation in American society (Howe 2001).

In this highly divisive yet American context, socioeconomic pressures ran high for Jews. Accusations of un-Americanness, or dual loyalty, would be a severe blow to the community in the 1940s. Over 120 antisemitic organizations were established in the 1930s, some infused with European fascism (e.g., Fritz Kuhn’s German-American Bund). Industrial moguls such as Henry Ford were able to be openly antisemitic, and Ivy League colleges imposed quotas on Jewish applicants. Meanwhile, memories of the lynching of Leo Frank (1915)<sup>52</sup> and the Rosenbluth case (1924)<sup>53</sup> were all too vivid – making the politicization of domestic anti-Semitism (as was the case in Europe) a real possibility in the collective consciousness of American Jewry. Economic recession and nativism exacerbated the insecurity, further contributing to the *sha shtil* [be quite ] mindset of American Jewish communities in the 1940s (Feingold 1993).

It is therefore highly likely that Wise’s fear did not stem from memories of diaspora or paranoia. In fact, his fear was well founded and consistent with American Jewish leaders’ emphasis on security in the face of the

52 Leo Frank was a Jewish-American factory manager who was falsely convicted of murdering a 13-year-old girl in Atlanta, Georgia. B’nai Brith and the Anti-Defamation League were established to defend him. He was lynched by a local mob (1915), which led Jewish residents of Atlanta to flee their homes. Frank was granted a posthumous pardon in 1986.

53 Robert Rosenbluth, an American Jewish Captain from World War I, was accused of killing Major Alexander Cronkhite (1918), and the publicized case led Henry Ford to openly claim that Rosenbluth was part of an international Jewish conspiracy. Rosenbluth was acquitted (1924), but the distress profoundly lingered in American Jewish communities. The Rosenbluth trial was billed as “America’s Dreyfus case”.

emergency. A tangible example is Wise's nearly compulsive opposition to the Bergsonites – a “noisy”, unmistakably foreign entity without much of a foothold in American society. One of Wise's rifts with Kook concerned the Roosevelt administration. The Bergson Group did not hesitate to openly criticize the president, whose relationship with Wise must have been cultivated over years of dedication and discretion for the sake of American Jewry, or so Wise believed. The emergency of European Jews and the outcome of the Bermuda Conference prompted an emergency within American Jewry itself; it was hardly advisable for Wise to risk privileged access to Roosevelt by challenging him, not in spite of the emergency but *because* of the emergency. Esteemed scholars of the Holocaust and American Jewish leadership tend to attribute Wise's uncompromising, intolerant personality to the persistent strife and tension within American Jewish circles and around the Bergson Group<sup>54</sup> – but claiming that his antagonism toward the Bergson Group was completely unfounded in this context is hardly justified.

From the perspective of the American Jewish Conference, fusing the rescue effort and Palestine issue was a way to address the complex emergency of American Jewry. Beyond Zionist convictions, this was a safe and affirmative approach to securing the locus of American Zionist leaders in American society and concurring their Anglo-American alliance. Their focus on postwar American policy regarding Palestine presumed the victory of the Allies, which would inherently solve the Jewish refugee problem (by relocating the refugees to a newly established national home in Palestine) under the pretext of the Balfour Declaration (1917) and the Biltmore Program (1942). In effect, they did not touch on American immigration policy nor demand that the American government act for Jews during wartime – issues that the Bergson Group publicly heralded through the Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People in Europe, thereby obstructing the very delicate status quo that American Jewish leaders painstakingly tried to maintain in the face of the emergency.

54 Wise's harsh treatment of opponents and his egocentrism were widely acknowledged, even by his supporters; Wise also developed paranoia and would tell others that Kook would assassinate him on the street (Rapoport, *Shake Heaven & Earth*).

Precisely because of the context of emergency, both Wise and Kook leaned harder into their respective approaches, thus exacerbating tensions during those agonizing years. The visibility of the Bergson Group's activities does not indicate general American Jewish inaction; Wise and Kook had woefully disparate orientations that corresponded with different dimensions of the America they encountered. American Jewish elites reacted to the emergency based on the sociopolitical contexts in which they lived. The Bergson Group, on the other hand, enjoyed relative independence and had fewer elements to consider in devising its *modus operandi*, which appealed to American values – values American Jews themselves struggled to rely on due to their experience of the American democratic norms and social “melting pot”.

## Conclusion

In his interview with Wyman in 1973 Kook lamented, “Why did we respond the way we did? The question should be: why didn't the others?” This lingering question has lent itself to a legacy of American Jewish inaction during the Holocaust. With Wise as the usual suspect, American Jews have attempted to make sense of six million European Jews perishing while life in America was relatively comfortable. What were our leaders doing? Or as Elie Wiesel later put it, “How was he [Wise] not driven mad?”<sup>55</sup> The question implies another excruciating thought: if Wise had indeed gone “mad” over the issue, would this have made any difference in America in 1943-1944? Would it have prompted intervention in the violence overseas? Inevitably, possible answers to this have caused intense public and scholarly debates.

In 2011, in partnership with the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, Yad Vashem held the *International Symposium: The Bergson Group and America's Response to the Final Solution* (July 11, 2011).<sup>56</sup> In response to Wyman's presentation on Kook's contribution to the establishment of the War Refugee Board, Yad Vashem Director Dr.

55 Quoted in Rapoport, *Shake Heaven & Earth*.

56 For the Symposium program, [http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/about/institute/pdf/symposium\\_bergson\\_group.pdf](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/about/institute/pdf/symposium_bergson_group.pdf).

Robert Rozett read a letter from Bauer (who could not be present) aloud to the audience. Bauer's letter bluntly refuted Wyman's key arguments: "To claim today that Kook was responsible for saving lives in Budapest [via the War Refugee Board] is little short of preposterous... In a sense, the [US] administration was right, as it was powerless to save the millions. The only answer was to win the war and kill the murderers. Kook and Wise could not do much about that."<sup>57</sup> Medoff harshly shot back: "The idea that there was nothing the American government could have done in 1944 to rescue more Jews – that is preposterous." The subject is a contentious issue to this day, and the burning debates concerning it often blur the lines of what was possible and what was outside of Kook and Wise's control, such as America's restrictive immigration policies and the operation of the War Refugee Board during wartime.<sup>58</sup>

Consequences do not absolve actors of their choice to set certain goals or of subsequent actions. An examination of archival sources on the Emergency Conference lucidly illustrates the goals and activities of the Bergson Group in the face of the emergency. In his third year of residence in America, Kook led the Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People in Europe and brought much public attention to the rescue issue, leading to the Gillette-Rogers Resolution. Even by today's standards, these were truly extraordinary accomplishments for a small, foreign group – and marks Kook's tremendous achievements in 1943.

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