Ahad Ha’am (Asher Ginsberg, 1856–1927) wrote those words a few months after the First Zionist Congress assembled at Basel in August 1897. He emerged at that time as the most vociferous inside-the-tent critic of Theodor Herzl and his ilk of political Zionists. Ahad Ha’am mused: what kind of state is this that we are bringing to fruition? Is it merely(!) a political haven for Jewish refugees? Or can it aspire to something more, to become a catalyst of a national cultural revival of the Jewish spirit?

The atrocities of the Shoah took some of the sting out of Ahad Ha’am’s critique by the midcentury. Indeed, in the 1940s it was easy to argue that if only a political haven for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel could be realized—well, dayeinu. It was largely Herzl’s descendants who signed their names to the M’gillat HaAtzma-ut on 5 Iyar 5708/May 14, 1948, making the two-thousand-year-old dream a reality.

But today, from the vantage point of 70 years since Independence and over 120 years since the First Zionist Congress, Ahad Ha’am seems more prescient than ever. In 2018, much of his Zionist vision has come to fruition. In spite of the hardline theocratic
coercion that has become the hallmark of Israel’s Chief Rabbinate and its political enablers, an extraordinary renaissance of Jewish life has blessed our generation, with Israel at its epicenter.

The revival of Hebrew culture that emerged in the last century is one of the most extraordinary chapters of Jewish history. But we are confident that, in decades to come, they will also speak of an era when a great rediscovery of Judaism took place in our own time. This generation has witnessed creative pockets of our people who have re-embraced Torah, Talmud, and Jewish thought—on our terms, not those of the Chareidi or Hesder yeshivot. Women scholars and students, especially, have led the way for this dramatic rekindling of the authentic Jewish birthright: the Torah tradition that articulates the Jewish spirit.

With a nod to Ahad Ha’am and his vision of the revival of Jewish life that Zionism would spark, we present this volume of the CCAR Journal: Reform Jewish Quarterly on the seventieth anniversary of the State of Israel. In this edition, we endeavor to wrestle with the spiritual and intellectual meaning of Israel today.

In Part One, an array of scholars present reflections on this question of what the State of Israel might mean in a liberal religious context. We return to some of the past shapers of Zionist thought—A. D. Gordon, Mordecai Kaplan, Judah Magnes—to investigate the value of rediscovering their ideologies today. Furthermore, we explore other theological expressions of Zionism, including the meaning of the Prayer for Israel in contemporary liturgies and the challenge of Zionist education in the twenty-first century and the age of social media.

In Part Two, we present a more intimate collection of reflections on Reform Judaism and Zionism by American and Israeli leaders. They share their perspectives on the unique challenges of this moment: engaging secular Israelis in the Reform Jewish milieu, the challenges of Zionist education at summer camp, and the tensions between idealism and the sobering reality of modern Israeli life. And we struggle with the continual challenge of making the case for our Zionist vision in the generally politically progressive context of Reform synagogues in the United States.

Ahad Ha’am posited that the Jewish State would spark the renewal of Jewish religious and cultural expression around the world. We are especially delighted to share contemporary feminist midrashim from the collection Dirshuni. These writings artfully
adhere to traditional constructs of midrash, while providing a variety of compelling spiritual statements about our present condition. In a similar vein, for years we have admired the Hebrew poetry of Admiel Kosman, and we are pleased to share a collection of his poems for this anniversary volume.

Note that the questions of Israel’s security, the conflict with the Palestinians, and questions of religious freedom in the Jewish State are not the main focus of this volume. We stand on our records that those issues remain close to our hearts and act as prime directives in the daily work that we do. But the occasion of this anniversary is also this: an opportunity for each of us to look within and to ask ourselves to meditate upon the religious meaning of being a part of a generation that knows a State of Israel. Scores of generations of our ancestors prayed that God would take note of them and restore them to their historical home. Are we of a generation that has integrated the fulfillment of those prayers into our own religious outlook? If so, in what ways do we express that awe and gratitude, and wrestle with the theological and spiritual implications of such an historical occurrence?

That religious challenge lies at the heart of Reform Zionism, and this anniversary is an opportunity for reflection and a renewed understanding—of Jewish life in Israel and Israel in Jewish life.