

Early Zionism and The Settling of Palestine

The Zionist Controversy

A famous Rabbi once told a story: “Once there was a town in which there was a well that had been closed and sealed for as long as anyone could remember. It was common knowledge that the water of this well was poisoned, such that anyone who drank from it would go insane.”

“One day, a group of distinguished doctors came to town, and they heard about the well. ‘We must investigate this well for ourselves,’ they said. As they were distinguished doctors, the townspeople could not refuse them, and so they agreed to open the well for them. The doctors performed tests on the water, and determined that there was nothing bad or poisonous about it; the water was perfectly safe to drink. People began to drink from the well, and they indeed became insane. As more and more people drank and went insane, these insane people began to look at the sane people who had not drunk from the water as insane. For such is the way of insanity: those who suffer from it believe themselves to be normal and everyone else to be insane. The sane people, of course, told the insane people that they had gone insane, but their words went unheeded.”

“Now that the well was open, more and more people drank from it, until there were left only a small number of people who had not drunk. The whole town shouted at this tiny minority, ‘Lunatics! Lunatics!’ There came a point where these few individuals stopped and reconsidered: ‘Perhaps the whole town is correct and we are the lunatics, and we must drink from the well water and heal ourselves.’

“But then they reassured themselves with the following logic, ‘We still remember the days when the well was closed and sealed, and everyone knew that the water was poisoned and whoever drank from it would go insane. If so, then we must be correct. We are normal and sane, the others are all insane, and we will not drink from the well.’

The identity of the Rabbi is Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk (1853-1918), one of the greatest and most respected non-Hasidic Rabbis of the late 19th century, a *tzadik* and giant of Lithuanian (Litvak) Orthodox Judaism. The water is Zionism. Rabbi Chaim was far from alone in opposing the new movement. Nearly every great Rabbi among both the Hasidism and the Litvaks opposed Zionism. The following story is told about Rabbi Ahron Roth (1890-1947), the founder of Shomer Emunim, a meditative sect of Hasidism (and one of Reb Zalman Shachter-Shalomi's favorite Hasidic teachers): "A festive meal was held to celebrate the completion of a Torah scroll in memory of the Jews killed in the Holocaust. All the Chassidic rebbes and heads of yeshivas attended, including the Rebbe. He said down at the table opposite the Zionist chief rabbi [Herzog]. He asked others who this man was, and they replied that it was the Zionist chief rabbi. The Rebbe immediately stood up from his place and left the hall. On the way home, he said, "I did not want to sit at the meal together with him." One of the Chassidim commented that this chief rabbi was somewhat better than his predecessor, but the Rebbe said angrily, "I don't want to hear any praises of him. If he is with the Zionists, it is forbidden to speak positively of him."

Even after the state was established The Orthodox Rabbinic establishment of the early 20th century was at first not impressed with what others saw as the military and political accomplishments of the modern Israeli state. The Chazon Ish (Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, 1878 – 1953), a revered Rabbi still widely studied in Orthodox circles, once said, "The only actual difference with the formation of the Zionists State is, that before this they were hoodlums without a military, and now the hoodlums have one."

Rabbi Shalom Ber Shneerson, 5th Lubavitcher Rebbe (1860-1920), wrote, "Their plan to gather the Jewish people together with their own power will never be; and all their strength, their many strategies and efforts will not work or have any success against the will of G-d." Later in the same letter he wrote, "Whoever twists the meaning of the Torah and finds proofs to Zionism from the Torah, and especially from the Hidden Torah, is like one who places an idol in the

Temple....May G-d in His great mercy remove this accursed doctrine from among the Jewish people, and inspire their hearts to repent to Him in truth.”

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneersohn, the Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe (1880-1950), wrote, “The straight-thinking Jew looks on in astonishment, thinking: what do these rebels against G-d and His Torah have to do with the Land of Israel?” He also wrote, “I hereby join with the honored rabbis who oppose and protest against the Zionists. They do not walk in the spirit of the Torah. I wish to convey in writing that the Jewish people should separate themselves from this terrible desecration. Let the defiled leave the face of the Holy Land!”

Later in the same document he states succinctly the reason for his opposition and the opposition of many other Orthodox Rabbis: “We are sworn by the covenant of G-d that we cannot overcome with might or power, only by understanding and knowing the word and command of G-d.”

The Brisker Rav (1886-1959) said, "Jews must take their fate into their own hands, they say. They think that their state somehow saves the Jewish people, when in reality it is the worst exile (*galus*) of all." He also wrote, “In the end of days, the Torah foretells in Parshas Nitzavim.... “the gentile who comes from a faraway land,” will see the desolate condition of Eretz Yisroel and ask, “Why did Hashem do this to this land? Why was this great anger aroused?” And the answer will be that they worshipped idols (29:23-25). The Brisker Rav commented: The worst part of the tragedy described here is that the Jews will be just as ignorant as the gentiles as to what caused the Jewish people’s problems. *But note that only the gentiles from faraway lands will be ignorant; the gentiles from Eretz Yisroel [i.e the Palestinains] will know well what the problem is.*”

The religious resistance to Zionism was based on a few factors: 1) mass immigration back to Israel before the messianic age is forbidden by the Talmud; 2) warring against the nations is also forbidden; 3) the Zionists advocated for a Jewish identity based on peoplehood and land as opposed to being based on the Torah. As a later anti-Zionist Litvak Rabbi, Avigdor Miller (1908-2001), said: “For today’s Jews shabbes is optional, kashrus is optional, studying Torah is optional, but Israel Bonds: these are sacred!”

On the other side of the Rabbinic debate was Abraham Isaac Kook (d. 1935), mystic, poet and visionary who believed that secular Zionists were unwittingly bringing the Messiah. All Jews, he believed, have within themselves a divine spark that motivates them to fulfill God’s will even when they do not intend to do so (unlike gentiles, who in Kook’s worldview have no such inner spark). Secular Zionism is a manifestation of this divine spark. Through divine guidance, history is inexorably progressing toward the messianic age, and secular Zionism is an essential part of this process. Religious Jews, therefore, should support Zionism, while recognizing the religious significance that secular Zionists themselves do not see. Kook’s ideas, later transformed by his son Yehudah Zvi Kook, would become the theology of religious Zionists and the Jewish settler movement today. .

The Holy Land Before Zionism

Jews lost all sovereignty over their homeland in 136 CE after the Bar Kokhba revolt was crushed by the Roman Empire. By then it had been some time since Jews had ruled the region the Hebrew Bible says was promised to them by God. The area had been shrunk by the conquests of the Egyptians, Assyrians and Babylonians, as well as back and forth struggles for land with the

Philistines and other local non-Jewish tribes. The last Jewish state in the area was the Hasmonean Kingdom ruled over by descendants of the Maccabees, a state about half the size of modern Israel at its peak. The Hasmonean Kingdom became a client state of Rome, and in 6 CE was officially declared a province of the Roman Empire.

After the Bar Kokhba revolt was put down Jerusalem was destroyed and a new city, Aelia Capitolina, was built over it to be the capital city of the Roman province of Palestine. Jews were forbidden to enter Aelia Capitolina and lived mostly in the north. They were now a powerless minority in the Roman province. The center of Jewish life moved to Babylon as well to other parts of the Roman Empire (Egypt, Syria, North Africa, Eastern Europe, France and Germany).

The Rabbis reformulated Judaism to be a portable religion where the “Temple” was now “the four cubits of the halacha”, i.e. the body and actions of the individual Jew. The Rabbis taught, as had the prophets before them, that the Jewish people had no *right* to the land of Israel. It was a gift to them dependant on them living there by the covenant. To put it another way, God had not given Israel to the Jews in perpetuity, but rather, as the Hebrew Bible says many times, Israel was given to Jews so they could fulfill the Torah, and if not, then in the indelicate words of the Chumash, “the land would vomit them out.” The common Zionist phrase that Jerusalem is the “eternal capital of the Jewish people” is both historically and theologically inaccurate. According to traditional Judaism, Jerusalem belongs to God.

The belief of those who wrote the Torah was that the people had betrayed the covenant many times, and this had caused defeat, exile, disempowerment, and finally the loss of the land. Attempts to take back power through warfare had not worked; the Rabbis concluded that only when the Jews were faithful to the Torah and won back the *reward* of the holy land would God return them- to take it back by force was forbidden. Passages in the Torah promising a messianic age where a great redeemer would establish Israel in peace, end violence throughout the world, and bring knowledge of God to all that lived, were now interpreted as being about the return of Jews to Israel by the Messiah, which would be a part of the redemption of the world and the long-awaited fulfillment of all of God’s plans for Israel and humanity.

The Rabbis of the Talmud wrote that there were three oaths: *One, that the Jews should not ascend to Eretz Yisrael as a wall (take it back en masse by force). And another one, that the Holy One, Blessed be He, adjured the Jews that they should not rebel against the nations of the world. And the last one is that the Holy One, Blessed be He, adjured the nations of the world that they should not subjugate the Jews excessively.*

The three oaths mentioned above, or rather the two applying to Jews, were taken quite seriously, as was the Rabbinic teaching that Jews should relate to the nations non-violently even if oppressed by them. Jewish law and consensus prior to 1890 stated that Jews should defend themselves boldly before the nations, but only with words. In the 1890s some argued that since the nations had broken the third oath, Jews were released from the first two. Orthodox Rabbis did not agree, arguing instead that if the nations broke their oath with God, then God would deal with it himself.

In the religious imagination of Jews between 136 CE and the 19th century, Israel was a magical land. Jews prayed multiple times a day for the messianic return to Israel and the redemption of the world. Prophecy, they said, was more easily attained in Israel (or *only* attainable there according to some); the produce was huge and tasted impossibly good; the soil had magical properties, etc. For some its reality was more metaphysical than actual, for example Rebbe Nachman, while still revering the literal holy land, taught that the inner meaning of Israel was “the land of faith and miracles” i.e. the reality a person of total faith encountered, where miracles could happen. Thus for him Israel was a state of mind accessible anywhere.

In the 19th century a group began arguing that Jews, who were just a people like any other as opposed to a religious tribe bound to the Torah, could only live in freedom, peace and strength if they shrugged off traditional religion and its promises and built their own nation-state to protect themselves. After some debate over where it should be, it was decided it should be an “altneustate” (old-new state) in Palestine.

But what had been happening in Palestine since the end of Jewish power there in 136 CE, seventeen hundred years before?

Palestine

“Palestine” is a very old name for the region that more or less maps onto what Jews called *Eretz Yisrael*, one that goes back to 12 century BCE Egyptian inscriptions which call the area Paleset. Assyrian inscriptions from the 8th and 7th century BC refer to the same region as “Palshtu” or “Pilistu”, and the ancient Greeks and then Romans gave the area the name Palestine. These names are rooted in the heavy presence of Philistines in the area, a people little is known about, and who may have originated in the Mediterranean. They have been lost to history, though graveyards and other archaeological evidence in Israel confirms their existence. The Philistines and the tribes of Israel fought for control of the land, according to the Hebrew Bible, for centuries, before the Philistines were defeated by the rising Israeli monarchy.

Throughout history Palestine has been a land of many peoples. The Hebrew Bible relates that Abraham and his family were a small clan which lived amongst at least seven major tribes in Cana’an (as it was then known to Jews). When Jews became numerically and politically superior Jews became the dominant force in the area and claimed that it had been given to us by our God, YHVH, in order to build a utopian state outlined in our Torah. On the ground, though, the area was always shared with other peoples who had their own historical, cultural and political claims to the land. The Torah itself assumes there will be many non-Jews in Israel and warns us to “love the stranger” and create “one law for the Jew and non-Jew.”

After the land Jews called Israel was reduced to the Kingdom of Judah and then the Roman Province of Palestine, it became a multicultural province of the Roman Empire. By the 4th century CE it was a polyglot land of people from all over the Empire, including a growing contingent of Christians descended from Arab, Jewish, and other Middle Eastern and Mediterranean roots. Jews were by then a minority, having centred their culture outside the land after the Roman Imperial machine had disempowered them. Palestine became a province of the Byzantine Empire, home to a majority Christian population, from the 4th century until the area fell to Muslim rule in 638 CE. It became known as Filastin, part of the larger Muslim province of Al-Shab.

The region was Arabized as a consequence of the inclusion of Palestine within the rapidly expanding Arab Empire. Palestine, then a Hellenized region controlled by the Byzantine empire with a large Christian population, came under the political and cultural influence of Arabic-speaking Muslim dynasties. From the conquest down to the 11th century, half of the world's Christians lived under the new Muslim order and there was no attempt in that period to convert them. Over time, nonetheless, much of the existing population of Palestine was Arabized and gradually converted to Islam. Like other "Arabized" Arab nations the Arab identity of Palestinians, largely based on linguistic and cultural affiliation, is independent of the existence of any actual Arabian origins.

During this period Filastin was a culturally rich civilization of mostly Arab Christians and Muslims with a small population of (mostly Mizrahi) Jews. *Ahl Filastin* and *Ard Filastin* ('people of Palestine' and 'land of Palestine') were used by Palestinian Arab writers in the 10th–18th centuries long before the emergence of a Palestinian national movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The area had a unique regional culture due to its location between major civilizations and the presence of three Abrahamic faiths as well as small communities of other tribes, clans and local religions like Zoroastrians, Sabians, and other non-Abrahamic religions. The city of Al-Quds (Jerusalem) was an important centre for the Muslims of the region, who believed Mohammed had visited there and established a mosque before his famous "night flight" to visit the heavenly realms. The mosque, al-Aqsa, was built over the ruins of the Jewish temple. As tragic as this was, it should be noted that this was done just as Jews had destroyed and built over the temples of non-Jewish nations when we first came to control the land.

Jerusalem, "The Eternal City Of The Jewish People"?

Jerusalem was first settled between 3500 and 4500 BCE by non-Jewish residents of Cana'an. By 1700 BCE it was a well established Canaanite city. In 1000 CE (according to the Hebrew Bible) King David sacked the city, taking it from the Canaanites. It was under Jewish control for four hundred years before falling to Babylonians, then Persians, then Greeks and then Romans. During the Greek period Jerusalem was again ruled by Jews for 103 years under the Hasmonean Kingdom. Thus Jews had sovereignty over Jerusalem for a total of about 500 years, though Jews

lived there for around a thousand years until they were expelled by the Romans in 136 CE, after which Jerusalem became the Roman city of Aelia Capitolina for about 500 years.

Muslims lived in and ruled Jerusalem from 638 CE until 1947, apart from an 88 year period where the city was taken by the crusaders. Thus Jerusalem was the Muslim city of al-Quds for almost 1200 years, 700 years longer than it was controlled by Jews. Jews historical, mythological and cultural ties to Jerusalem are very real, but we can see that so are Muslim and Christian ties to the city, as well as those of other peoples who have called it home.

For 1700 years, aside from the brutal skirmishes of the crusades, the peoples of Filastin lived more or less at peace with each other. The Ottoman Empire, whose capital was Constantinople, and which was known in the West as the Turkish Empire, controlled much of Southeast Europe, Western Asia and North Africa between the 14th and early 20th centuries. The province of Filastin was controlled by the Ottomans from 1516 to 1917, when it was taken from them during WW1 by Britain and France, after the Ottoman Empire allied itself with Germany.

Pre-state Zionism 1897-1947

In 1878 Jews made up 3% of the population of Palestine.

In 1917, when Palestine was forcefully taken from the largely Muslim Ottomans by the British and the French, it had a population of 657,000 Muslim Arabs and 81,000 Christian Arabs. It also had a population of 59,000 Jews, most of which had emigrated since the 1890s in the hopes of igniting the new Zionist project, bringing the Jewish population closer to 10%.

In 1897 Theodor Herzl, an Austro-Hungarian journalist, playwright, political activist, and writer, had infused Zionism, which at the time was a small movement led by Jewish intellectuals, with a new ideology and practical urgency, leading to the First Zionist Congress at Basel, Switzerland, in 1897, which created the World Zionist Organization (WZO). Hertzl had written, in his landmark “The Jewish State”:

I believe that a wondrous generation of Jews will spring into existence. The Maccabees will rise again.

Let me repeat once more my opening words: The Jews who wish for a State will have it.

We shall live at last as free men on our own soil, and die peacefully in our own homes.

The world will be freed by our liberty, enriched by our wealth, magnified by our greatness.

And whatever we attempt there to accomplish for our own welfare, will react powerfully and beneficially for the good of humanity.

Herzl began an energetic strategy of international diplomacy behind the idea, and he and his co-workers focused on increasing immigration to Palestine and attempting to form an alliance (unsuccessfully) with the Ottoman Empire and several other players (like the Pope). Before his death he planned to suggest the Zionist council accept a British offer to give land in Uganda for a Jewish homeland, but he died before he could see the offer rejected by the WZO. Chaim Weizmann (1874-1952) would take over as the next great Zionist diplomat, and play a key role in getting the Balfour Declaration from the British government in 1917:

His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

Cabinet heard from both Zionist and non-Zionist Jews before issuing the declaration. Non-Jews who then made up 90% of the population of Palestine, were not consulted. It should be noted that the specific identities of the “non-Jewish communities of Palestine” are neither mentioned nor protected in the declaration, nor are their historical roots in Palestine acknowledged. The British government said, in 1939, that the local population's views should have been taken into account, and recognised in 2017 that the declaration should have called for protection of the Palestinian people's political rights as well.

Why did Britain issue the Balfour declaration? The explanation probably lies in the secret Sykes-Picot negotiations over Palestine that Britain was conducting with France to decide who would have it. Cooperating with the Zionists would get Britain a pro-British Jewish colony on the ground, helping to cement their claims to the area. As historian Eugene Rogan wrote, “On the face of it Lord Balfour was offering Palestine to the Zionist movement. In fact Lloyd George’s government was using the Zionist movement to secure Palestine for British rule.” This was further complicated by the fact that Britain had encouraged Palestinian Arabs to rebel against the Ottoman Empire with promises that they would facilitate an independent Palestinian Arab state after the war was over, a promise they promptly abandoned when it no longer served their interests.

British rights over Palestine were recognized in 1922, against the wishes of the non-Jewish Arab majority of Filastin, now the “British territory of Palestine”. Among Palestinian Jews, the new Zionist arrivals hoped that Britain might cooperate with the creation of a secular Jewish state in the area. The old yishuv (older settlement of religious Jews), who were the majority, were opposed. Relations between the old yishuv and local Arabs were generally good, but rumours of the Zionist project were beginning to circulate and provoking hostility among the locals to all Jews. They viewed Zionism as an imposition of their unwelcome British overlords and their European Jewish collaborators.

Between 1878 and 1948 the Jewish population of Palestine would increase from 3% to 32%. The Jews who arrived bought land from Arab landlords and usually evicted the Arab tenant farmers, replacing them with Jewish labour. Schools and other infrastructure went up for Jewish use alone, and most Zionist settlements did not employ Arab labour as a matter of principle, further stoking resentment. Arab perception was that Jews intended to grow to dominate the land while creating a nation for themselves, as opposed to growing the country for all the residents of Palestine.

Non-Jewish Palestinians revolted against British colonialism and the growing Zionist presence in 1920, 1929, and 1936, leading to many deaths on all sides. During the 1929 Hebron riot, 133 Jews and 129 Arabs were killed. During the 1936-1939 uprising demanding Arab independence

and the end of open-ended Jewish immigration and land purchases, over ten percent of the adult male Palestinian Arab population between 20 and 60 was killed, wounded, imprisoned or exiled by British authorities. The British employed brutal methods to suppress the Arabs including torture, imprisonment without trial and execution.

A minority of Jewish Zionists criticized the Jewish Zionist establishment for racism, dismissal of Palestinian Arabs concerns, and injustice towards them. Ahad Ha'am (1856-1927), the Russian Jewish Zionist, wrote in 1891:

“We must surely learn, from both our past and present history, how careful we must be not to provoke the anger of the native people by doing them wrong, how we should be cautious in our dealings with a foreign people among whom we returned to live, to handle these people with love and respect and, needless to say, with justice and good judgment. And what do our brothers do? Exactly the opposite! They were slaves in their Diasporas, and suddenly they find themselves with unlimited freedom, wild freedom that only a country like Turkey [the Ottoman Empire] can offer. This sudden change has planted despotic tendencies in their hearts, as always happens to former slaves [‘eved ki yimlokh – when a slave becomes king – Proverbs 30:22]. They deal with the Arabs with hostility and cruelty, trespass unjustly, beat them shamefully for no sufficient reason, and even boast about their actions. There is no one to stop the flood and put an end to this despicable and dangerous tendency.”

“We who live abroad are accustomed to believing that the Arabs are all wild desert people who, like donkeys, neither see nor understand what is happening around them. But this is a grave mistake....The Arabs, especially the urban elite, see and understand what we are doing and what we wish to do on the land, but they keep quiet and pretend not to notice anything. For now, they do not consider our actions as presenting a future danger to them. ... But, if the time comes that our people's life in Eretz Yisrael will develop to a point where we are taking their place, either slightly or significantly, the natives are not going to just step aside so easily.”

-Ahad Ha'am, Russian Jewish Zionist, 1891- “Truth from the Land of Israel [Eretz Israel]”

In 1907, in an article in HaShiloah, one of the earliest modern Hebrew-language publications, the Odessa-born teacher and activist Yitzhak Epstein returned to Ahad Ha'am's point. Epstein belonged to the *Hovevei Zion*, the earliest Zionist organization. He had witnessed the purchase of the lands of Ras al-Zawiya and al-Metulla (now known in Hebrew as Rosh Pina and Metullah) several years earlier, and he remembered the anger of the dispossessed Druze farmerst:

‘The lament of Arab women ... still rings in my ears’, he wrote. ‘The men rode on donkeys and the women followed them weeping bitterly, and the valley was filled with their lamentation. As they went they stopped to kiss the stones and the earth.’

Epstein warned that relations with the Arabs were the ‘unseen question’ that the Zionist movement was not addressing. He argued that Zionists tended to “forget one small detail: that there is in our beloved land an entire people that has been attached to it for hundreds of years and has never considered leaving it....What will the fellahin [arab pheasant farmers] do after we buy their fields?” he asked, “we must admit that we have driven impoverished people from their humble abode and taken bread out of their mouths.” His argument attracted little response, as had Ahad Ha'am's before him.

In Palestine itself, the emerging leader of the new Yishuv was David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973), who played a key role in shaping Mainstream Zionist policies as the “Jewish homeland” was created. These included a left-leaning government (B-G was a moderate socialist) and a hope for peace with the Arabs that would be based, as he said, on “Jewish power.”

US President Woodrow Wilson in 1919 appointed the King Crane Commission to explore the implications of the Zionist project. The commission recommended “serious modification of the extreme Zionist program for Palestine of unlimited immigration of Jews, looking finally to making Palestine distinctly a Jewish State....to subject a people...to unlimited Jewish immigration, and to steady financial and social pressure to surrender the land, would be a gross violation of the principle [of national self-determination]... and of the people's rights”. The Zionist project “could [not] be carried out except by force of arms” said the report.

The Zionist response was that “Palestine was a small part of the overall Arab homeland, and therefore, the rights of Arabs in general were not violated by Jewish settlement and political control in Palestine. They could still exercise their political rights freely in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and so on.” This problematic argument is still repeated today. It manages to ignore the fact that there was no “Arab homeland” but rather many different countries with different cultures, histories, political realities, and religious commitments consisting of a variety of different peoples within the Arabized sphere. Saying Palestinians could be absorbed by Jordan or Saudi Arabia is like arguing that it would be ok to displace Nigerians, for example, since Nigeria is only a “small part of the black homeland” and other black countries could surely absorb them. Most importantly, to do so would ignore the humanity and wishes of the Nigerians just as surely as the argument ignores the fact that Palestinians were real people with real rights and desires who did not want to give up their land or country.

Mainstream Zionists also argued that Jews would eventually be the majority in Palestine and therefore would have the right to do with the country what they wished. Lastly, they argued that the average Palestinian didn’t know what was best for them- Jewish development of Palestine would actually benefit them, and they should welcome becoming part of a Jewish state.

The Arab riots and rebellions of 1920-1939 brought home the realization that the Arabs would not ‘easily yield their place’, as Ahad Ha’am had predicted 30 years earlier. The Yishuv’s National Committee invited Yitzhak Epstein, as an old expert on ‘Arab affairs’, to address it on the topic. Epstein called for “involving the natives in all our activities. In actual practice we must take it upon ourselves – from the points of view of justice and necessity – to involve them in everything.” His call for egalitarian democracy in Palestine was reportedly met by the committee with “cold silence”.

Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher and mystic, proposed to the 12th Zionist Congress of 1921 a resolution that urged Jews to reject “with abhorrence the methods of nationalistic domination, under which they themselves have long suffered”, and renounce any desire “to suppress another people or to dominate them”, since in the country “there is room both for us and its present inhabitants”. The official Zionist leadership rejected this approach, insisting that

Arabs accept the Balfour Declaration as a basis for cooperation. In other words, Arabs needed to recognize Palestine as the national home of the Jews before Zionists would work with them. Buber and other bi-nationalists were willing to proceed without that, instead allowing for Jews and non-Jews to build a new political entity which would recognize all residents as equals. The bi-nationalists like Martin Buber were in the minority and the Zionist mainstream prevailed.

Buber and others, including academics affiliated with the newly-established Hebrew University in Jerusalem like Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, created “Brit Shalom,” the first major Zionist Arab-Jewish peace group, in 1925. In its statutes, the association defined its objective as follows: “to arrive at an understanding between Jews and Arabs...on the basis of absolute political equality of two culturally autonomous peoples, and to determine the lines of their co-operation for the development of the country”. Its founders came from different political and personal backgrounds. Some of them were well established Yishuv leaders, who saw reconciliation with Arabs as a practical necessity (like Arthur Ruppin, a senior Zionist settlement official). Still others were inspired by moral convictions, and saw the need to incorporate the needs and concerns of local people – not only of Jews – into the Zionist mission. Ruppin, as a senior settlement official, was criticized by his Labour allies who regarded Brit Shalom as “delusional.” Ruppin worried that Zionism would “deteriorate into pointless chauvinism” and that it would become impossible “to allocate a sphere of action to a growing number of Jews in Palestine without oppressing the Arabs.”

The Zionist mainstream consistently claimed that Palestinian nationalism was superficial and was a result of the “ignorant masses” of Arabs being manipulated by an elite who wanted to destroy the Zionist project. This was a dangerous misunderstanding. In fact, as other Zionists saw, the non-Jews of Palestine were deeply attached to the farms and villages their families had lived in for generations and identified with their land and culture just as much as Jews identified with theirs. Hans Kohn (1891-1971), a Zionist, philosopher, and critic of nationalism, wrote: “I cannot concur with this policy when the Arab national movement is being portrayed as the wanton agitation of a few big landowners. I know all too well that frequently the most reactionary imperialist press in England and France portrays the national movements in India,

Egypt, and China in a similar fashion – in short, wherever the national movements of oppressed peoples threaten the interest of the colonial power.”

He wrote: “We have been in Palestine for twelve years [since 1917] without having even once made a serious attempt at seeking through negotiations the consent of the indigenous people. We have been relying exclusively upon Great Britain’s military might. We have set ourselves goals which by their very nature had to lead to conflict with Arabs. We ought to have recognized that these goals would be the cause, the just cause, of a national uprising against us ... But for twelve years we pretended that the Arabs did not exist and were glad when we were not reminded of their existence.”

With lucid prescience, Kohn wrote that without the consent of local Arabs, Jewish existence in Palestine will only be possible “first with British aid and then later with the help of our own bayonets ... *but by that time we will not be able to do without the bayonets.* The means will have determined the goal. Jewish Palestine will no longer have anything of that Zion for which I once put myself on the line.”

Brit Shalom warned that without an ongoing link to traditional Jewish values Zionism would be reduced to crude political nationalism and lose its claim to be a continuation of Judaism. These warnings turned out to be the final words from Brit Shalom, which faded out of existence in the 1930s as the rise of anti-Semitic fascism in Europe and elsewhere saw 200,000 Jews moving to Palestine, more than doubling the Jewish population there and filling the Zionist project with a new sense of legitimacy and urgency.

Non-Jewish Palestinians, meanwhile, were engulfed by their own sense of impending doom. The transformation of the Jewish community into 30% of the population, with dense institutional network and organizational capacity, meant that the trend was going against Palestinian hopes for a democratic, representational government. The Jewish community increased military cooperation with the British, actively assisting them in repressing the Arab revolts, and also reduced its dependence on Arab labour and produce. Attempts were made to reach agreements slowing Jewish immigration to reduce tension between Jews and Arabs, but the Zionist

leadership fiercely resisted them. This was partially a result of increasing Jewish power in the land and partially based in growing anti-Semitic fascism in Europe.

Nevertheless a new bi-nationalist movement emerged, a successor to Brit Shalom called Ihud (Unity). The association called for "Government in Palestine based upon equal political rights for the two peoples." It was led by Judah Magnes (1877-1948) and Martin Buber, veteran critics of mainstream politics, as well as the famed Jewish anti-fascist intellectual Hannah Arendt (1906-1975). In a 1942 letter to an American Reform rabbi, Magnes defined Jewish nationalism as "unhappily chauvinistic and narrow and terroristic in the best style of Eastern European nationalism". When this statement became public and he was harshly criticised, he defended his views: "What I had in mind was not the few extremists ... but rather, definite acts which some important leaders and groups have not repudiated and which take on the aspect of being, to say the least, not contrary to their national policy."

In the face of armed Arab resistance and changing political desires, the British in the 1940s had gradually withdrawn their support for the Zionists and were attempting to slow Jewish immigration to Palestine even as European fascism and the refusal of other countries to provide refuge made it almost inevitable that the demand for Jewish immigration to Palestine would skyrocket. In 1942 another Zionist of impact arrived in Palestine, Menachem Begin (1913-1998). Begin quickly made a name for himself as a fierce critic of the dominant Zionist leadership for being too cooperative with the British, and argued that the only way to save the Jews of Europe, who were facing extermination, was to compel the British to leave. In 1942 he joined the Irgun, a rightwing underground Zionist militia which had split from the main Jewish military organization, the Haganah, in 1931. In 1944 Begin assumed the Irgun's leadership. He launched a series of guerrilla attacks to humiliate the British and force them to resort to repressive measures, which he hoped would alienate mainstream Zionists and unite them against the British. Begin banked on the international media being attracted, which he referred to as turning Palestine into a "glass house" with the world looking in. In his plan this would draw international attention, and British repression would create global sympathy for the Irgun's cause, which in turn would translate into political pressure on Britain (all of this may sound eerily familiar). Ultimately, the British would be forced to choose between continued repression or withdrawal, and Begin was certain that in the end, the British would leave.

On 1 February 1944, the Irgun proclaimed a revolt. Irgun teams bombed the empty offices of the British Mandate's Immigration Department in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa. The Irgun next bombed the Income Tax Offices in those three cities, followed by a series of attacks on police stations in which six policemen were killed. Meanwhile, Lehi, another extremist wing, joined the revolt with a series of shooting attacks on policemen.

In 1944, after Lehi gunmen assassinated Lord Moyne, the British Resident Minister in the Middle East, the official Jewish authorities, fearing British retaliation, ordered the Haganah to collaborate with the British. Known as The Hunting Season, this campaign crippled the Irgun for several months, while Lehi, having agreed to suspend activities, was spared. Begin, anxious to prevent a civil war, ordered his men not to retaliate or resist being taken captive, convinced that the Irgun could ride out the Season, and that the Jewish Agency would eventually side with the Irgun. Gradually, shamed at participating in what was viewed as a collaborationist campaign, the enthusiasm of the Haganah began to wane, and Begin's assumptions were proven correct.

In the summer of 1945, as it became clear that the British were not planning on establishing a Jewish state and would not allow significant Jewish immigration to Palestine, Jewish public opinion shifted decisively against the British. The end result was the Jewish Resistance Movement, a framework under which the Haganah, Irgun, and Lehi launched coordinated series of anti-British operations. For several months in 1945–46, the Irgun fought as part of the Jewish Resistance Movement. Following Operation Agatha, during which the British arrested many Jews, seized arms caches, and occupied the Jewish Agency building, Begin ordered an attack on the British military and administrative headquarters at the King David Hotel. The bomb killed 91 people, including British, Arabs, and Jews, who were inside the hotel. In September 1947, the British cabinet voted to leave Palestine.

In 1948 68% of the total population were Arabs and 32% were Jews. In November of 1947 the United Nations approved a resolution to partition the country between Arabs and Jews, with 61% of the land going to the Jewish state, and 39% going to the Arab one. The UN voted for partition, a result enthusiastically welcomed by the Yishuv even as intercommunal violence broke out between the Jewish and Arab populations. Ben-Gurion declared

Independence and then international war broke out between the nascent Jewish state and five Arab countries. Buber bemoaned the state being “built in blood” and stated that even if the Yishuv won it would be a false victory, as it would be a defeat of the true Zionist ideal of national rebirth- “not simply the secure existence of the nation” but the revival of its ethical mission. For Buber the normalization of the Jewish state was tantamount to assimilation. Jews were succeeding in becoming a normal state, he wrote, to “to a terrifying degree.” “I cannot be joyful in anticipating victory,” he wrote, “for I fear that the significance of Jewish victory will be the downfall of Zionism.”

As fighting raged between the fledgling Jewish army and the Arab armies, within Palestine, 800,000 Palestinian refugees would be displaced, almost 500 Palestinian villages depopulated (and many destroyed) and Palestinian society “shattered.” Several massacres of Palestinians occurred, many of which were long denied but which have been proven by testimony from aging Israeli veterans no longer afraid to speak and by declassified government archives. These massacres involved the machine-gunning of civilians and the use of rape as a weapon of war by Jewish soldiers. In one such massacre, that at Tantura, the bodies of 200 Palestinian civilians, men, women and children, were buried in a mass grave which has recently been shown to be now under the parking lot at a popular beach (Dor) in Tel Aviv. The massacres and rapes were communicated to the recently born Knesset in real time, and though some members of the Knesset spoke in horror, some voices, including Ben-Gurion, saw the destruction of Palestinian village life as an acceptable price to pay for victory. Palestinian villages were in most cases renamed in Hebrew and populated by Jews, and there was widespread looting of Palestinian possessions by Jewish soldiers and civilians. Much of the land was seized by the new government to be held “in trust” for the absent Palestinians owners, then rented (or eventually outright sold or given) to Jewish Israelis.

The early Israeli government chose not to allow Palestinian refugees to return to their villages and landholdings, some of which had been in their families for generations. The young Israeli government, faced with the daunting task of building a country nearly from scratch and integrating Jewish refugees from many different countries, many of whom spoke different

languages, saw the Palestinian refugees as an undesirable and dangerous burden. Calls from Jewish peace activists like Martin Buber to welcome them into the new Israel were ignored. Israeli society was gearing up for what is surely one of the most remarkable accomplishments in human history: the intentional, designed birth of a country, complete with a new language and a functioning economic, political, technical, agricultural and social infrastructure, including a rich community of artists, writers, musicians and philosophers, and the creation of a new homeland for Orthodox Jews as well (though many of them continued to be officially anti-Zionist and not recognize the state). The refugees moved into camps or became second-class citizens in Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. One Arab statesman of the time grimly commented that the refugee camps were not a bad thing- they would breed the future fighters which would destroy the unjust Zionist state.

The destruction of Palestinian society is known to Palestinians as the “Nakba”, or the Catastrophe, and is commemorated the day after Israeli Independence Day in Israel today, although the government financially penalizes any Israeli institution that acknowledge it. Some Palestinians wear the keys to their former homes on necklace chains which have been passed down in their families, or otherwise make “key symbols” to mark the “right of return” they believe they have. Thus was born the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which 74 years later still rages like a festering sore. As is known to everyone here, the conflict has also long changed into a conflict within Jewish society as well, with strongly held opinions in defense of Israeli actions or in defense of Palestinian human rights, and with Jews divided over whether Jewish values are better expressed by support for the Israeli state, or by opposition to its human rights record. We will be leaving the history of the modern Israeli state here, however, with a prayer for peace for all of its peoples. In this course our trajectory is towards the birth of Jewish Renewal, a movement to reinvigorate Jewish spiritual life in the diaspora, and towards the diaspora we will now return.