

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF ZIONISM

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ZIONISM is now being described as imperialism, colonialism, racialism and so on. All these charges appear to me to be baseless. To clarify our own position on the subject something ought to be said about its origins.

May I begin with a story of my conversation with an eminent Russo-French philosopher, [], not a Jew, who wrote a remarkable book on Hegel. He said to me: 'I wish you would explain something about the Jews which I don't understand. Here is a nation, which has had a most fascinating history. Their contribution to human culture is unique. Their story is extraordinary. Nobody can rival it. Yet now they want to become like Albania. Could you explain?'

I said: 'Yes, they do wish to become an Albania, to have a State of their own, not a very large State. They desire a national existence on their own soil.'

We had a long discussion, and I said: 'Do you think of the Jews as simply a religious community? Many Jews maintain that this is all they are.' He said: 'No, of course not. Nobody does. Nobody ever has.'

Well, I don't know about whether nobody ever has. But if we look at literary monuments it is perfectly clear that Shylock or Fagin are not thought of principally as religious characters. Shylock in the mind of Shakespeare is a stranger in Venice and is liable to be expelled, whereas if Bassanio had become a Calvinist he would still be a Venetian.

When Dickens talks about Fagin he has in his mind something strange which does not quite fit in in a really homogeneous society.

This is obviously the view which has been taken of the Jews by outsiders and which ultimately came to be taken by the Jews of themselves.

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Zionism arose out of the emancipation which pressed Jews against the problems of their identity more agonisingly than they had ever had to face it before. They became emancipated during the age of nationalism, which bred a certain kind of xenophobia, anti-Semitism.

To use the late Professor Namier's famous analogy, the great frozen mass of the Jews began to melt under the rays of the Enlightenment. Some remained frozen in the great religious communities of Russia and Poland and were unaffected by it, remained absolutely still with their Messianic hopes and no contact or as little as possible, with a strange and alien gentile world.

Some evaporated in the direction of general assimilation, and some would turn into Russian streams, either of revolutionary activity against the regime which oppressed them, or into national activity which was the Zionist movement.

Some, of course, sought emigration. But emigration was no help for their actual condition because exactly what happened to them in Russia might easily happen to them anywhere else. In a sense, all they were seeking was a better, more tolerant life, in the natural human desire to escape from oppressive Russian conditions. But the social, moral and political problem which they faced as an alien population in a larger society would face them wherever they emigrated.

Assimilation produced its own counter-productive results: when people choose to regard themselves as being similar to people from whom they are in fact historically different, this produces a disagreeable effect upon the people with whom they claim identity. This reaction took an anti-semitic form and so created obstacles to assimilation itself. If they tried not to do that they were accused of exclusiveness and cliquishness. In the end, they were accused of being aliens and even traitors. So in a sense, they were doomed whatever they tried to do. And this, in the end, faced them with an acute problem.

I strongly doubt whether Jewish nationality is as ancient as it is sometimes maintained. No doubt, the Jews as a religious community developed certain habits, customs and culture of their own. But the desire to constitute themselves into a modern State did not arise before the nineteenth century.

After all, when the Jews were driven out of Spain by the Inquisition in the late fifteenth century, Palestine was then an

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empty country into which they could have immigrated. They did not; they went to the south of France, Italy, Turkey or Germany, but not to Palestine. At that time, the notion of a territorial State was perhaps not very vivid anyhow.

The desire to be a nation living on its own soil was a natural Jewish reflection of the kind of national movements which began in Europe towards the end of the eighteenth century and developed in the nineteenth.

The impact of Zionist propaganda upon other Jews produced two reactions which I call the ostrich effect and the oyster effect.

The ostrich effect simply means the Jews who chose not to look facts in the face, who maintain they were merely a religious community, but otherwise no different from, say, other Germans or Danes who happened to be Protestants or Catholics.

The oyster effect is somewhat different. It is the phenomenon of making a virtue out of necessity, of saying 'true, we have suffered and there are certain problems regarding our status. But we are called upon by God or destiny to preach a certain kind of truth to the world which, of course, exposes us to humiliation and persecution. But it is our duty to continue in this. Happiness is not the greatest ideal.

There is the famous story of the German philosopher Hermann Cohen. When one of his disciples tried to convert him to some kind of Jewish nationalism, he said: 'I see. So the gang wants to be happy now, does it?'

In his view, the duty of the Jews is to preach certain moral truths which derive from the Bible which, in Hermann Cohen's view, was identical with truth as preached by Kant. Cohen himself was half ostrich, half oyster.

The ostrich part led him to produce writings in which he explained the mysterious affinity between Jews and Germans, showing how their cultures developed on similar lines. Well, history produced its own tragic verdict on that.

The oyster part in Cohen was simply to say: it is true that we suffer and have this peculiar fate. But it is wrong to seek after the sort of mere happiness and comfort which other nations have. Life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness are not the greatest ideals; our business is to preach justice and higher ideals and if we are persecuted for it then, by God, we must be persecuted for we are a nation of priests ...

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I call this the oyster phenomenon because the grit introduced into the oyster causes the disease which ultimately can produce a pearl. It might happen only with one case in a million. But if an oyster said 'I don't want to produce a pearl, I just wish to live a normal, healthy life', this is forbidden because the oyster's mission is to suffer and produce these pearls.

It is a very typical historical phenomenon to rationalise your misery as the highest form of values. It is not confined to the Jews, just as minority status is not confined to them.

The position of the Czechs or Croats in the Austrian empire before 1914 was not entirely dissimilar. They too were discriminated against in some respects. The same could be said of Chinese in Malaya.

The difference was that these people could, if they wished, go back to some country in which they were a majority whereas the Jews could not. This is the ultimate root of modern Zionism, the acute nostalgia built into our religion ever since the days of our Exile. It originally took a Messianic form – to be fulfilled in the next world – and ultimately in the nineteenth century became translated into secular terms.

Modern Zionism – or Jewish nationalism – posed the questions:

Why must we not have what everyone else has?

Is it necessary for us to be a minority everywhere?

Surely there be some way of living normal lives on some piece of land in which we are the normal majority?

Let me make plain what I mean by nationalism. Nationalism often means a pathological condition of national consciousness when, for some reason, it becomes diseased and aggressive towards others. But in the Jewish case all I mean is awareness of oneself as a member of a community possessing certain internal bonds which are neither superior nor inferior to but simply different in some respects from similar bonds which unite other nations. It does not preclude holding a large area of ideals in common with everyone else.

This is the normal national consciousness defined by German philosophers like Herder towards the end of the eighteenth century. They tried to say that, besides the basic desires of human

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beings for food, shelter, procreation and a minimum degree of liberty, there is also the desire to belong to a community which they can regard as their own, in which they feel comfortable and in which they do not feel stared at by others, in which they do not constantly have to justify their existence. This was all that Zionism in its beginnings amounted to – normalisation.

If you say ‘what about Palestine? Were they not really thinking in concrete terms?’, I think of the famous story told by Moses Hess about his grandfather who came from Poland. Every year on the Feast of the Tabernacle, as he held in his hands the lulav and the etrog, large tears rolled down into his long white beard as he said: ‘These are the fruits which our ancestors used to give many years ago when they had a land of their own.’

It was this which planted in Hess the notion that perhaps Jews have a history, are some kind of national entity and not mere holders of certain religious beliefs who are otherwise indistinguishable from surrounding nations. This caused him eventually to write *Rome and Jerusalem* in which he denounced the German Jews in justifiedly unbridled terms, telling them that the non-Jews hated them not because of their religious beliefs but because the Jews pretended they were exactly like their neighbours. So Zionism was born.

Nevertheless, it is a truism that if the Russian Government had not concentrated the Jews in its western provinces there would not have been this closely packed mass of people of the same tradition, religion, nationality, outlook and ethnic composition.

The isolated Jews of the West, however uncomfortable they might feel, whatever their complicated relations to their neighbours, were sufficiently involved in the affairs of the West, and sufficiently disunited from each other for it to have been very unlikely that they could have formed an effective national movement.

No matter how much Herzl might have been wounded by the anti-Semitism which the Dreyfus Case brought out, no matter how deeply Nordau might have felt, no matter how much German, Austrian, English, French Danish and American Jews might have felt, it is very unlikely that there could have been a national movement without a pre-existing national entity.

The sheer political-geographical fact of a continue adjacency of Jewish settlement in eastern Europe, and partly in other countries,

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created a kind of artificial national minority. Indeed, the Jews of eastern Poland and western Russia were not altogether dissimilar in their social composition from, say, Ruthenians or from some other minority.

They were a nationality who lived surrounded by their own values, insulated from the rest of the world, developing some kind of internal national or quasi-national consciousness so that their idea of being a people which needed to live on its own soil made sense.

They had a mode of living which was in some respects culturally much higher than that of the peasants who surrounded them and with whom they not only felt no consanguinity but no kind of natural sympathy or bonds. They were already a group which could shift without suffering some damage, and which had portable cultural goods. The institutions of the Jews were not rooted in Kovno or Grodno, or even Warsaw. They were detachable except perhaps about the edges where there was assimilation and evaporation. But the mass was homogeneous within itself and heterogeneous from its surroundings. This was the demographic origin of the Zionist movement.

There now arose the question 'What about the Arabs in Palestine?' Yet this was hardly mentioned. Palestine was thought of as a derelict, empty land. The only person who ever gave it thought was Ahad Ha'am in his usual uncomfortable way. He began to wonder what would happen when individual purchases of land by Jews, which were welcomed by individual Arabs, gave way to mass immigration.

As long as the Turks were there, there was no question of a Jewish national seat. Among Zionist leaders, therefore, the idea was of immigration of Jews simply in order to rehabilitate themselves physically, culturally and morally – but not politically.

They said to themselves: here is our land, it is capable of supporting a population of, say three million (they said it even then); there are now 400,000 Arabs there, so there is room for everybody. Why should this constitute a problem?

In Herzl's *Alt-Neuland*, for example, Arabs do not figure much. There is a friendly Effendi, a sort of dignified amiable figure who obviously represents a minute minority. But there was little notion of natives, of resistance, of fighting opposition.

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At the time of the Balfour Declaration, it was perhaps possible to arrive at some sort of accommodation with the Arabs if it had been set about sufficiently resolutely by the mandatory Government or by the Jews themselves. Perhaps not enough thought was given to these things.

It seems to me that if Feisal, who had said he welcomed Jewish immigration, had been allowed his throne in Syria, which was the condition for his attitude towards Zionism, he might have made arrangements by which at least a portion of Palestine could have been assigned to Jewish settlement.

When the French drove Feisal from Syria and the British Government, not wishing to provoke the French further, planted him in Iraq, he must have realised that the Jews, particularly Weizmann, could not deliver the goods. Until then he must have thought that the Jews had it in their power to arrange almost anything with the European Powers, for they were so rich, powerful and ubiquitous. However, when it turned out that they could do nothing at all, the whole thing turned sour and everything followed from that.

In the 1930s, one of the troubles in Palestine was that the local administration and the Government in England had no fixed policy at all. They were technically committed to creating a National Home for the Jews but the colonial officials were bred in the ideology of doing good to the natives.

I remember very well my first visit there in 1934. It was very like E. M. Forster's *Passage to India*. The atmosphere was exactly like an English Public School. The Arab boys were sometimes liable to rioting as was natural with high-spirited boys. But on the whole they were good, natural, physically well-developed boys who generally obeyed their masters and cultivated quite pleasant, loyal and warm relationships with them.

Then there was the Jewish House, which was planted there because it was a modern school. The Jewish boys were much cleverer, they did not play games, they were hard-working swots who got all the prizes and, in some cases, were more intelligent than the masters. The poor British officials, therefore, had a rather complicated task for which they were ill-prepared.

But the root of the whole matter was that there was a genuine conflict: on the one hand, the British administration was committed to a somewhat vague idea of a Jewish National Home;

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on the other hand, all their emotions were on the side of the natives. The result was that they sabotaged quietly what their conscience did not allow them to sabotage openly.

But when Hitler came, the question of the Jewish State became absolutely imperative. Until then, people like Weizmann must have thought that you could make of Palestine some kind of dominion of the British Empire. Weizmann was somewhat suspicious of the political talents of the Jews. He wondered whether, left to themselves, they would develop the kind of political organisation he so admired in England and which he so hoped the Jews would have. He thought that, on the whole, a longer period in the British Empire would do the Jews no harm. But events left no alternative but to proclaim the State.

Whether an accommodation with the Arabs could ever have been produced after the initial failure in the early 1920s I simply cannot tell. It seems to me that the last chance of this was probably the Peel Commission of 1936. If the kind of Jewish State which had been contemplated had been put through and not sabotaged by the Foreign Office, as we all know it had been, there was a chance of somehow or other completing some very mild degree of transpopulation within the borders of Palestine itself.

The State would not have been large but it would have been a State and its Arab minority would have been minute. I think that was the last chance of avoiding the tragic situation which developed later and which has created 'Arab Zionism'.

We ourselves are the cause, although not the motive for the creation of an Arab movement very similar to our own. The slogans which the Arabs use are not so dissimilar from our own. We say to them – or at least Mrs Meir did in an unfortunate moment – that there were no such people as Palestinians.

Historically speaking, this was right. There was a moment when the Palestinians did not exist, when they would have described themselves as Syrians, at most as southern Syrians. In the 1920s, they certainly did not wish to be called Palestinians. But they now say that events changed and there is a Palestinian nation. Similarly, they say to us: 'You are not a nation but a religion.' So we have two nations facing each other in an extremely tragic conflict.

We reply to the Palestinians: 'we tried to talk to you but you don't want to talk to us. You have been used by other Arab countries for political motives. You are refugees. You wish to

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exterminate us. You wish to destroy us, but we don't wish to destroy you.'

While these are true, nevertheless the Palestinians do exist and, as human beings, they have rights. If we recognise our own rights to be a majority somewhere we must recognise some kind of rights on their part, too. This is the moral position between us and them. We hope some kind of accommodation will be reached. There is no reason why this should not be so. But to deny their right to assert themselves does not seem to be the best way of doing it.

Meanwhile, we have an Israeli nation, with its pros and its cons. The things being said against it are well known. The Israelis are accused of provincialism, of living on charity, of a certain degree of political tyranny, of some degree of corruption in their municipal and political life. All that may be so. But of course the experiment as an experiment was a success.

If its purpose was to straighten Jewish backs, to create a nation not suffering from the particular disease which brought the movement into being, not to create those insecure nervous types who did not know where they belong, who suffered from all kinds of suppressed and open inferiorities, who were constantly looking over their shoulders to see what other people thought of them, who were constantly nervous and being warned by their more cautious leaders of tactless behaviour which must not irritate the neighbours – if that was the purpose, it was achieved.

There was also a hope on the part of the more spiritually ambitious that a nation of great Jewish talents would somehow be produced. This takes us back to the oyster: it is fortunate for the Israelis that the number of their brilliant chess-players is not too great, that the number of marvellous composers, of tormented but creative poets, of persons similar to Heine and Kafka is not excessive. If the number of Koestlers and Steiners in Israel had been enormous I think the position of their society would have been far more unstable than it is.

It is marvellous that Israelis have developed a normal life. They are perfectly ordinary human beings who do not suffer from the particular neuroses which the Zionist movement was intended to cure.

But the purpose of the movement was also to create a situation in which Jews, like other human beings, can make a free choice. They can say to themselves either I wish to live as part of a

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majority, part of my own nation, as a normal member of a natural community without having to worry about my identity. Or they can say: 'No, I don't wish to do this'. I don't mind a certain degree of spiritual discomfort; I wish to remain in the Diaspora because I am quite contented, or not discontented enough to wish to move.

Until Zionism arose, this choice was not available for Jews. When a Greek went to the United States and gave up his Greek passport, it was clear what had happened – he had been a Greek and now he was an American. But when Mr Warburg left Hamburg in order to set up a bank in New York, nobody said he was a German and now he was an American. He was regarded as an eminent Jewish banker called Warburg who used to keep his bank in Hamburg and now keeps it in New York. Which is a very different thing.

Today, individual Jews have this choice. They can be passionate supporters of the State of Israel or they can ignore it. They can contribute to it, can live there, can visit it constantly, can regard themselves as its emissaries abroad. They can have any relationship they wish with it which is desirable in a free, open-textured liberal society. This was not open to them before. And this is the achievement.

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