

Jews, Israel, Nationalism and the Way Forward

By Bennett Muraskin

Can the people of France claim descent from the Gauls? Are Italians related to the Romans? Do Greeks today have the blood of the Hellenes running in their veins?

The answer is probably no. Migrations, invasions, expulsions, intermarriage have all but obliterated any claims to such ancient lineage.

So what about the Jews? Even before the Romans crushed the Jewish rebellion and destroyed the Second Temple in 72 CE, the majority of Jews lived in the Diaspora. Proselytism was common among Jews until the 4th century CE, until the Church suppressed it, but continued in areas outside the reach of Christendom. Jewish men traveling as merchants to a variety of destinations often took non-Jewish wives, who became Jews. Together they started Jewish families that grew into far-flung Jewish communities. Ashkenazic Jews from Europe, Mizrakhi Jews from the Middle East, Sephardic Jews from Iberia, Ethiopian, Indian, Kurdish, Central Asian and even Chinese Jews—how likely is it that these disparate groups have common roots in ancient Israel?

Actually many Jews did remain in the region of ancient Israel after the Roman suppression, although they were no longer the majority. The Mishna was written there, and so was the Jerusalem Talmud. In the early 600s, Jews in what was then part of the Byzantine Empire greeted the Persian invaders as liberators from Christian oppression, and after the Persians were driven back, greeted the Muslim conquest for the same reason. It was after the Muslim conquest in the 640s that the Jewish presence in the region shrunk to a tiny minority. The majority of Jews probably converted to Islam, along with the other inhabitants of the region. That is why David Ben-Gurion believed that the Arabs of Palestine were the direct descendants of the Jews of ancient Israel. But even this may be a fanciful notion considering population movements over millennia.

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When the first Zionists emigrated to the area of Palestine in the 1880s, in response to European anti-Semitism, Jews living under Ottoman rule in Palestine constituted about 5% of the population. By the time of the Balfour Declaration in 1917, 10% of the population was Jewish. Even in 1947, Jews only amounted to 33% of the population of Palestine under the British Mandate, and 55% of the Jewish state in the boundaries set forth by the UN Partition Resolution. Most were Ashkenazim from Europe and lived along the Mediterranean coast, an area that was not part of ancient Israel, which was centred on the West Bank of the Jordan.

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Zionism is premised on the claim that Jews were sovereign in Judea until exiled by the Romans and therefore had a right to return and recreate a Jewish state. The evidence in support of this claim is weak. But assuming for the moment that it is accurate, the fact that few Jews remained in this territory for well over a thousand years gives the Arab inhabitants who made up 95% of the population when Jews began to “return” in large numbers in the 1880s a better claim.

It is true, then, as anti-Zionists claim, that Jewish settlement of Palestine since the 1880s was not a “return” as much as a “colonization.” However, this assessment overlooks two factors—first, subjective Jewish consciousness, and second, traditional Arab/Muslim attitudes toward Jews.

According to the Jewish Bible, God first gave the land of Israel to the ancient Israelites, then exiled them from the land for their sins, but promised to restore their descendants to their ancient glory some day. As a matter of faith, this story is not susceptible to rational argument; however, it was deeply embedded in the Jewish consciousness. The secular and less observant Jews who flocked to the Zionist movement may not have believed in a divine plan, but they still fervently believed that Jews had roots in ancient Israel and looked forward to “returning” there. If not for this profound emotional connection to the land of Israel, proposals to establish Jewish colonies in Argentina, Australia, Uganda or Birobidjan would have gained more traction.

It is only natural for a native population to resist the mass immigration of outsiders determined to create their own nation-state, but the

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relationship between Arabs and Jews was more complicated. Although the American Indians, for example, had no prior experience with the European invaders, the Arab natives of Palestine and the surrounding lands were familiar with Jews. Jews lived throughout the Arab world for millennia, including a small number in Palestine itself. Under Islamic law, Jews were *dhimmis*—a religious minority with inferior status to the Muslim majority. Jews experienced periods of both toleration and persecution under Muslim rule, but were never considered the equals of Muslims. Although *dhimmi* status was abolished in most Arab lands in modern times, hostile attitudes toward Jews remained and were reinforced by anti-Semitic propaganda from Europe. Memoirs of Jews who grew up in Arab lands in the 20th century clearly attest to their inferior status and their vulnerability to persecution.

In sum, ethno-religious prejudice as well as anti-colonialist sentiment shaped Arab attitudes toward Jews in Palestine and “Jews” in general. Where else but in the Arab/Muslim world is the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* still accepted as good coin?

Nationalism is by and large a recent invention, and Zionism is no exception. Whether or not contemporary Jews come from ancient Israel or Roman Judea (and I doubt either is the case), over the last hundred years or so, six million of them have constituted themselves as a Hebrew-speaking nation in modern Israel. I do not think Israel can or should lay claim to represent Jews living outside Israel, and giving up this notion is critical to gaining the trust of the Palestinians, but the Palestinians and their allies would do well to give up any notion that Israel is an ephemeral entity. Unlike the Crusaders, Israel’s Jews are there to stay, and unlike South African whites, who were a small minority in a sea of Black Africans and could not survive without them, Israeli Jews are more numerous than the Palestinians and do not depend on them as a labour force. Israeli Jews will simply not agree to give up their privileges and live in a single state with the Palestinians. Considering the horren-

dous legacy of the Holocaust, the unhappy experience of Jews in Arab lands, the anti-Jewish excesses of Arab/Palestinian nationalism and widespread Muslim prejudice against Jews, this position is understandable.

Many critics of Zionism hope to see the day when Israel becomes a single state of its citizens rather than a state belonging to one ethno-religious group. However, this ignores the reality of two nationalities in Israel—Israeli Jewish and Palestinian Arab. It has no chance of appealing to the better nature of Israeli Jews, because it does not recognize that Israeli Jews have national as well as civil rights. Although a single state would ostensibly treat all of its citizens equally, a bi-national state would further guarantee that each nationality controls its educational, communal and cultural institutions (as in Belgium or Switzerland or Canada). But even a bi-national state is a chimera at this stage. Just think how long it took for some Palestinians and Israelis to accept a two-state solution, and how many of them still reject the idea. Perhaps Hamas is slowly coming around. Therefore, for the foreseeable future, “two states for two peoples” is the only practical solution.

Another unrealizable demand is the “right to return.” Seeking compensation from Israel for dispossessed Palestinians refugees is a realistic goal. Expecting Israel to allow more than a nominal number of exiled Palestinians to return to Israel’s pre-June 1967 borders is not. It is a utopian demand that leads “nowhere.”

Of course, Israeli Jews have yet to recognize Palestinian national rights, and it takes two to tango. Recognizing the Palestinian claim to a capital in East Jerusalem is an essential concession the Israelis have yet to make. But for Palestinians to seek to change the status quo by acts of violence is a strategy that has failed. It invariably incites Israeli reprisals that only increase Palestinian suffering and creates a fortress mentality among Israeli Jews. Whether the newer tactic of boycotts, divestment or sanctions will succeed is doubtful, unless it clearly targets the occupation and not the existence of the State of Israel. Israel is not South Africa. It will not crack.

Where, then, should progressive Jews in the U.S. and Canada invest their energies? In pressuring the U.S. to leverage the enormous economic, military aid and diplomatic aid it provides to Israel into compelling it to accept the emergence of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza with its capital in East Jerusalem; in publicizing Israel’s violation of the human, civil and national rights of the Palestinians; and in supporting those Israeli and Palestinian organizations that work non-violently toward a viable two-state solution.◆

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