

Chapter 4

A Movement of Hope and Desire

The claim of the Jews to the land—tenuous historically, all the more ruthlessly claimed biblically—rests therefore on the unique quality of Jewish self-fashioning, its ability to carve fate into the soil.

—Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion*

In the introduction, we met Daoud Nassar, the grandson of a Palestinian Christian who bought a one-hundred-acre plot in the fertile hill country south of Bethlehem in 1916. On this windy hilltop, the story of the Israeli occupation of Palestine is unfolding. The Nassar farm stands alone, the last holdout in a region earmarked for annexation by the Jewish state. In 1991, using one of its chief methods of taking land and exerting control of the occupied territories, Israel declared the Nassar property “state land.” The burden was then on the family to prove ownership. Few Palestinians have been able to successfully prove land title to Israeli standards in the West Bank, a territory that has changed hands many times in the last two hundred years. Israel’s campaign of displacement is working. Farm by farm, village by village, Palestinian farmers are retreating to the teeming urban enclaves intended for those Palestinians who will not or cannot emigrate, bantustans accessible only through the network of restricted roads controlled by Israel: Hebron, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Jenin, Nablus, Jericho. Daoud, however, has pursued the case to the Israeli Supreme Court, spending close to two

hundred thousand dollars in legal fees and land surveys over an eighteen-year period, and the court has upheld his claim. Frustrated by this, Israel has attempted to gain the land by private means, i.e., buying it through questionable third-party arrangements—another common method of land acquisition. Daoud has been asked to name his price, but he remains steadfast. “We are not permitted to give up,” he says. “This land is my mother. My mother is not for sale.”

One day, Daoud was on his tractor cultivating a plot bordering the neighboring settlement. He was approached by a young man, perhaps no older than seventeen or eighteen, carrying a semi-automatic rifle—standard issue for an ideological Jewish settler in the West Bank. The boy approached Daoud, challenging him with the words, “What are you doing on our land?” Daoud answered him simply, “This is my land.” “No, it is ours,” said the boy, glaring at the Palestinian and nervously fingering his gun. Not a man to be intimidated, the farmer looked the boy directly in the eyes and said, “My grandfather bought this land. We have the papers to prove it.” The young Jew, pointing to the sky, replied, “You have papers from here. We have papers from God.”

Whose Land?

Like virtually every other location in the tiny strip of land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River known as Palestine, the land on which Daoud’s farm sits is fraught with history. In this case the history is relatively recent. The Nassar land is located almost exactly in the center of today’s Etzion settler bloc, an area charged with nationalist meaning for the State of Israel. In 1943, religious Jews founded Kfar Etzion near the road connecting Jerusalem to Hebron to the south. By 1947, there were 163 adults and 50 children living there. The kibbutz, together with three nearby kibbutzim established in that period, came to be called Gush Etzion (the Etzion bloc). The United Nations partition plan for Palestine of November 29, 1947, placed the Etzion bloc outside the borders of the proposed Jewish state. As

the forces on the Jewish and Arab sides gathered for the battle for control of Palestine, the Etzion bloc's location on the important Jerusalem-Hebron road lent it great strategic importance.

Over the winter of 1947–48, as hostilities intensified, the situation for the Jews of Kfar Etzion became increasingly desperate as several relief convoys were attacked, suffered losses, and turned back to Jerusalem. In January, the women and children were evacuated. The final assault by Arab forces began on May 12, and on May 13 the defenders showed the white flag. What followed is known in Israel as the Kfar Etzion massacre. Some facts are in dispute, but it is generally agreed that 129 Jewish inhabitants were mowed down by Arab irregulars. It is not clear whether a command was given or if someone opened fire and others followed. By one report, Arab soldiers shouted “Deir Yassin!”—the name of a Palestinian village near Jerusalem where over one hundred men, women, and children had been murdered by Jewish forces the previous month.

Kfar Etzion became the symbol of the heroism and martyrdom of those who died to bring the state into existence. The dead of Kfar Etzion were buried on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem, Israel's military cemetery. The date of the massacre was later established as Israel's Memorial Day.

In 1967, the Etzion bloc was recaptured by Israel. The Israelis who, as children, had been evacuated from the kibbutz in 1948 led a public campaign for the site to be resettled, and Prime Minister Levi Eshkol gave his approval. Kfar Etzion was reestablished as a kibbutz in September 1967; as such, it was the first Israeli settlement in the West Bank.¹ The Etzion bloc is one of the three major settlement blocs in the West Bank,

1. The story of the return of the descendants of Kfar Etzion is powerful and helps us understand the emotions driving the impulse to settle the West Bank as a “return” to the land. Yet it's important to keep in mind that the Israeli government has never sanctioned a “return” for Palestinians currently living in the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and other countries, who were once forced out of their own villages in present-day Israel. I am grateful to Anna Baltzer for this observation.

and it has been an area of intense development and expansion, with settlement by immigrants from abroad and Israel proper actively encouraged. The entire Etzion bloc is situated in Area C, which is under the civil and military control of Israel per the 1993 Oslo Accords. The separation wall encloses the entire bloc at its northern, eastern, and southern boundaries, isolating the approximately twenty-five thousand Palestinian villagers and townspeople living within it from Bethlehem, East Jerusalem, and the rest of the West Bank. Most Jewish settlements in the bloc are religious. Israel claims this section of the West Bank as part of King David's biblical kingdom.

Neve Daniel is one of these settlements. It is named after the relief convoy from Jerusalem that was turned back in March 1948, an event that marked the beginning of the end for the people of Kfar Etzion. The settlement of about fifteen hundred religious Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union, France, and North America borders the Nassar land to the east. In fact, recent Israeli maps of the area where the Nassar farm sits show not the Nassar property, but an area of pale blue that signifies an area of future expansion for the settlement.

Shaul Goldstein is the mayor of Neve Daniel. His father fought in the battle in which Israel reclaimed the area from Jordan in 1967. In 2007, Goldstein was interviewed for a feature article by *Los Angeles Times* reporter Richard Boudreaux, who visited the Nassar land in preparing the story. "In my view," Goldstein is quoted saying in the piece, "Israel from the Mediterranean to the Jordan Valley is a Jewish state. Its lands are earmarked first and foremost for Jewish citizens" ("A West Bank Struggle Rooted in Land," *Los Angeles Times*, December 27, 2007).

The newspaper article provides recent historical background for Goldstein's claim. Since 1967, when the land was occupied, it reads, Israel has pursued a program of seizing land from Palestinians and turning it over to Jewish settlement development. "Parcel by parcel," continues the piece, "Israel is taking control of farms, pastures and underground water sources to expand the Gush Etzion settlements for a growing population that now totals more

than 55,000.” Drawing the obvious conclusion about the future planned for the Palestinians of the Etzion bloc, Boudreaux writes, “Clearly, the plan does not include a thriving of these communities, or even their continuation. This land is for the Jews.” The Palestinians of the area, he points out, quoting a local Palestinian lawyer, are “severed from their places of work and education, their medical services, their extended families and, indeed, the rest of Palestine...I don’t believe that these small communities could survive for long.”

Lords of the Land

What was the impact of this story on the readers of the *Los Angeles Times* when they opened their newspapers over morning coffee on December 27, 2007? What does an American think when he hears about a colonialist project to take land from indigenous people out of a belief that the land belongs to the colonists by divine right?

The story should be painfully familiar to Americans, who may nevertheless be shocked to see it unfolding in our own time. Israelis, however, have been hearing about it for over two decades. Amira Hass, the Israeli reporter for Israel’s daily *Haaretz*, has been telling Israelis the story of the occupation for over two decades. Hass lived in and reported from Gaza from 1993 to 1997, moving then to Ramallah in the West Bank, where she lives today. She files regular reports on the impact of the occupation on Palestinian society as settlement activity has progressed, adding over a quarter of a million Jewish settlers since the mid-1980s. Hass has chronicled the growing boldness of ideological settlers who disrupt Palestinian agricultural activity through armed harassment—behavior allowed and even protected by Israeli security forces. This pattern, maintained throughout the West Bank from Jenin in the north to Hebron in the south, complements the “official” state policies of roadblocks, house demolitions, segregated roads, and the expropriation of land and water sources in the inexorable process of displacement and

dispossession that is the occupation. The settlers, Hass is saying, are doing the state's bidding.

Hass filed a story in August 2007, describing how she, another Israeli journalist, and three UN humanitarian workers were assaulted by Jewish settlers. The armed ideologues attacked the team's jeep, smashing the windshield and effectively holding them hostage. "They behaved like lords of the land," writes Hass, explaining how the laws applying in the occupied territories prohibit Israeli police or military from taking direct action against the settlers; on the contrary, such soldiers are officially there to "protect" settlers ("The Hebron Tactic," *Haaretz*, August 8, 2007). "The tactic," writes Hass, "is one that is well-known from Hebron, the same tactic that helped to cleanse the Old City of most of its Palestinian residents: Jews harass and bully and then threaten to lodge complaints against their victims with the Israeli police... they practice terrorizing Palestinians because Israeli authorities let them do so. In their own way, they do the same thing the 'legitimate' occupation authorities do: They drive the Palestinians off their land to make room for Jews. In other words, they are following orders."

These daily encounters are not accidents. They are not the random acts of a lunatic fringe of Israeli society. The settler boy who confronted Daoud Nassar in his field, the soldiers who observe from the sidelines or intervene only at times and only half-heartedly to prevent overt bloodshed from the violent actions of nationalist fanatics, the government agencies that facilitate the systematic dispossession of an indigenous population, the contractors who build the restricted roads and bulldoze houses and fields to construct the separation barrier—these are all part of a system that draws power from the same source.

Jews here and in Israel who present themselves as sympathetic to the "Palestinian cause" like to distance themselves from what they call the "extremist fringe" represented by the ideological settler movement. They claim that the criminal, racist actions of this violent minority are not the true face of the occupation. Not that the occupation does not, of necessity, compromise Palestinian

rights, continues this argument. It does, but it should come to an end once Israel can reach a negotiated agreement with the Palestinians. It's the classic straw man: the settlers are bad, but we, who believe in human rights, fair play, and nonviolence are good. Hass's reports, and the witness of anyone who has seen firsthand the ongoing ethnic cleansing of the shepherds of the southern West Bank and the farmers of the fertile territory in the northern hilltops and valleys, gives the lie to this "moderate" position. Hass's analysis is unerringly, tragically accurate: the settlers are acting out the will and intent of the Israeli government.

The Dreaded Trait of the Past

How did we get here? This is the precise question posed by Jacqueline Rose, the same Rose singled out by the AJC's Alvin Rosenfeld as one of the "new anti-Semites" of the Left. Rose, who visited the West Bank in 2002 to make a documentary, was moved to write the brief and compelling *The Question of Zion* in an effort "to understand the force—at once compelling and dangerous—of Israel's dominant vision of itself as a nation" (Rose 2005, xi).

Rose opens her book with the recounting of the 2003 suicide bombing in Haifa that killed four children. "While Ariel Sharon sent his planes into Syria in response," she writes, Israeli radio broadcasted an interview with Golda Meir, recorded during the Yom Kippur War thirty years earlier, in which she said that "Israel had no responsibility for war 'because all the wars against Israel have nothing to do with Israel'" (xi). Rose pursues the questions that we, not only as Jews but as citizens of the world, must ask ourselves: What is the source of Israel's view of itself as a nation? What is it about our collective Jewish consciousness that allows us to see ourselves as innocent of the trouble in which we find ourselves? Who is this people that presents itself, in Rose's words, "as eternally on the defensive, as though weakness were a weapon, and vulnerability its greatest strength?" (xiii). What is it, asks Rose, "about the coming into being of this nation, and the movement out of which it was born, that allowed it—and

still allows it—to shed the burdens of its own history, and so flagrantly to blind itself?” (xii).

Rose feels, as I do, a personal closeness to what she calls “the legitimate desire of a persecuted people for a homeland” (xii). But having experienced as I did the shock of seeing the occupation up close, she is asking the same question that arose for me: how did the Zionist dream come to so poison the soul of Judaism? Rose believes, however, that simply to distinguish Zionism from Judaism, to in effect discount or vilify it, is counterproductive. Her aim, rather, is to “enter the imaginative mind-set of Zionism in order to understand why it commands such passionate and seemingly intractable allegiance” (13).

Rose identifies Zionism as “one of the most potent movements of the twentieth century...As a movement, Zionism has the power, that is, to sacralize itself” (14). Zionism’s very power comes from its ability to transcend reality, to challenge what is perceived as possible, an attitude typified in Herzl’s famous statement of 1902, “If you will it, it is no dream.” Despite the urgently felt need for a solution to the intolerable conditions under which the Jews of nineteenth-century eastern Europe found themselves, Zionism, Rose asserts, “always knew it was propelling itself into an imaginary and perhaps unrealizable space. Before anything else, Zionism presents itself as a movement of hope and desire...” (16). Zionism is a form of messianism, she claims, and messianism “flourishes in dark times. Like Zionism, it is the child of exile” (17). Rose boldly focuses this historical lens directly on the present situation: “Messianic redemption is therefore a form of historic revenge. To put it crudely, it is way of settling scores. The violence of a cruel history repeats itself as its own cure” (20).

For me, this connection, grim as it is, hits home. How else do we come to terms with the horror and the tragedy of what we are seeing enacted in Israel and Palestine, a bloody drama that has ground down both Jews and Palestinians so mercilessly? But it is not advocacy for the oppressed Palestinians that is the aim of Rose’s analysis. It is to the Jews that she addresses herself in her book, a scant three chapters spanning 150 pages. “There is a

paradox here,” Rose explains. “It was misery that drew the Jewish people to the apocalyptic tradition and its message of catastrophe. But as they move forward to the dawn of a new history, the misery accompanies the vision, lodges itself inexorably inside the dream. The future that is meant to redeem you borrows the most dreaded trait of the past” (20).

Rose’s unvarnished picture, informed by her psychoanalytic perspective, helps answer the question of what is driving the Jewish people in the Zionist project. And is not an exploration of these psychological issues critical for understanding the “question of Zion”? Are these not the questions that we as Jews need to ask ourselves as we attempt to understand the tragic dilemma in which we find ourselves? But how far back into our collective experience do we need to travel to discover the roots of our current behavior? Rose makes the point that this spirit of messianic fulfillment runs “to the heart of Zionism *even when, or perhaps especially when, it does not know it is there*” (53; emphasis in original). Our self-narrative and our liturgy are shot through with stories of and a preoccupation with victimhood and suffering. Rose’s point is that it is this long-standing quality that colors the dream of redemption. “How on earth,” she asks, “can you stop something whose meaning stretches back through the annals of history and forward to the ends of time?” (20). We have to understand this in order to escape from its thrall. One way to do this, Rose believes, is to look at the heroes.

The Architect of Israel

Theodore Herzl may have been the visionary who created political Zionism, but it was David Ben-Gurion, born David Grun in 1886 in Plonsk, Poland (then part of the Russian Empire), who was the architect of the State of Israel. According to Rose, Ben-Gurion was possessed by a messianic vision for the Jewish people, a vision expressed in political Zionism. As a devout Zionist, Ben-Gurion did not believe that the Jews should continue to be dispersed throughout the world. He envisioned a radically different

future. From his memoirs: “The emancipation of the Jews led not to assimilation but to a new expression of their national uniqueness and Messianic longing” (Ben-Gurion 1972, 25–26). The uniqueness and specialness is a key component of this self-image. The Jews, in the words of the blessing of Balaam in Numbers (23:9), are “a people who dwell by themselves, who are not to be counted with the other nations.” For Ben-Gurion it was not just any place that the Jews should live out their separateness—for him, the Land of Israel was the only place for this solitary, special people. He saw Israel as the only appropriate object of this longing: “Without a messianic, emotional, ideological impulse,” he wrote, “without the vision of restoration and redemption, there is no earthly reason why even oppressed and underprivileged Jews...should wander off to Israel of all places... The immigrants were seized with an immortal vision of redemption which became the principal motivation of their lives” (1972, 25–26).

It is clear that the destinies of all the Jewish immigrants to Palestine—those driven by ideological fervor, those who were fleeing persecution, and those for whom it was a combination of both, as well as those Palestinians whose lands and fates lay in the path of the Zionist project—were in the hands of this brilliant, messianic, fanatical dreamer. Recall that this was a man who left Russia in 1906. The trajectory of his life was set in motion by the failure of the emancipation; the lens through which he viewed the world was his experience of the Jews as an isolated, oppressed group at the mercy of a failing, murderous, autocratic state. In his writing and pronouncements, Ben-Gurion was talking about the survival not of Judaism, but of the Jews themselves. Although Ben-Gurion was himself a non-observant, secular Jew, the language he used was religious. Rose quotes from an address Ben-Gurion delivered in 1950, two years after the declaration of the State: “The return to Zion and to the Bible is a supreme expression of the rebirth and resurgence of the Jewish people, and the more complete the return the nearer we will come to a full political and spiritual salvation” (Ben-Gurion 1950, 1). According to Ben-Gurion, therefore, there was only one place for Jews—the “return” must be “complete.”

It is as if the voice of David Ben-Gurion is being channeled through the mouth of Shaul Goldstein, the mayor of Neve Daniel and our modern-day enactor of the “rebirth and resurgence of the Jewish people” through the “return to Zion.” As one surveys the surrounding landscape from Daoud Nassar’s land and travels by car through Gush Etzion, the evidence of the vitality and driving force of this project is apparent everywhere. Down the hill to the west of Daoud’s farm, spreading through the valley and threatening to engulf the Palestinian village of Nahalin, is the “settlement” of Beitar Illit. To call this place a settlement is a misnomer, a term disclaimed by the inhabitants themselves. As one approaches Beitar Illit from the main road, a road restricted to Jews only, one encounters a huge sign at the entrance that reads: “Beitar Illit: A City of Torah and Devotion in the Hills of Judea.”² The visitor to the city’s web site is greeted by a real estate prospectus, an advertisement for a city that is, according to its own advertising, reclaiming a site that dates from Roman times when it was held and settled by Jewish zealots. The zealots have returned. This time, however, *they* have the army and *they* are erecting the fortifications to protect their colonies. Rose sees all this clearly, and understands the implications. “It is shocking,” she writes, “to consider that a nation, apparently inspired, believing fervently in its own goodness in the world, might be devoted not only to the destruction of others but to sabotaging itself” (2005, 21).

2. Note not only the designation “city,” but the use of the term “Hills of Judea.” “Judea and Samaria” are the Biblical terms for the territory of today’s West Bank. Jewish settlers always refer to this territory in this fashion. In their view, this land is being reclaimed as part of “Eretz Yisrael,” the Biblical Land of Israel. Political boundaries, armistice lines, international agreements and laws are secondary, irrelevant to the power of these ideological pioneers. With the election of a right-wing government in February 2009, this usage has entered the Israeli political mainstream, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu referring in a June 2009 speech to Israel’s “presence in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza.” (“Netanyahu: How Judea and Samaria Can Become ‘Palestine,” *Jewish World Review*, June 14, 2009, www.jewishworldreview.com).

But is this so shocking? Does it not follow that a nation “believing fervently in its own goodness in the world” might, given the right set of circumstances, follow a path to its own destruction? In the final chapter of his 2006 *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Israeli historian Ilan Pappé draws the unavoidable parallel between the modern Jewish state, building walls to enclose itself from the hostile “others” surrounding it, to the medieval crusaders, “whose Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem remained for nearly a century a fortified island as they shielded themselves behind the thick walls of their impenetrable castles against integration with their Muslim surroundings, prisoners of their own warped reality” (253).

Seemingly unable to stop itself, and enabled by considerable and unconditional financial and political support from the United States, Israel continues to pursue its colonial settler enterprise and to build the wall that expands and secures its acquisitions. Its Palestinian victims look on in a remarkable combination of seething frustration and philosophical calm. In the summer of 2006, our delegation went to see the wall on our first day in Jerusalem. The twenty-five-foot-high concrete barrier slices like a giant cleaver through the village of Al Azaria, once a neighborhood of Palestinian East Jerusalem and now an isolated enclave. We stood in what was once the main street, now—like so many other former urban thoroughfares in Palestine—an empty, trash-strewn ruin. Numb, we stood before this inexplicable horror, feeling dwarfed both physically and emotionally by its size and its ugliness. Still rooted to the spot, I looked to my left and observed, standing in the shadow of this wall, a small neighborhood grocery store, the kind you see everywhere in the world. It was, of course, devoid of customers, empty of the kind of activity you see in such places: shoppers coming and going, local people sitting for a spell talking with the man behind the counter. Several of us entered. “What do you do now?” I asked the man behind the counter. “What can I do?” he replied. Yes, he told us, once this store gave him a good life: he supported a family, travelled. Now—he gestured at the empty shop, the desolate street—“it’s all gone.” I groped for words. “How do you

cope?” I asked. He smiled, looking directly into my eyes: “Life is a circle. The sun rises and it sets. Bad times follow good times, and the good times return.”

We have to ask ourselves how we ended up here, in the role of oppressor, in violation of our own values of humanitarianism and justice, defending the unlikely reality of a Jewish state, a colonial project established against the protest and violent opposition of the indigenous Palestinian population and most of the Arab world. Everywhere you turn in Israel, you are confronted with this question. It is impossible to begin to answer without naming the Holocaust. “It was the horrors of the Second World War that gave the Jewish people an unanswerable case,” explains Rose (118). She tells the story of a journalist who asked a Palestinian-Israeli filmmaker, “Can you tell me what reason there is for the State of Israel?” The filmmaker replied, “The Holocaust” (119).

The reality of the catastrophe pervades Israeli society. Israeli writer David Grossman, in a talk at American University in Washington, DC, in October 2008, spoke about how, for Israeli society, the Nazi Holocaust is experienced as a current reality rather than something that happened in the past. When we refer to the Holocaust, said Grossman, we always talk about what happened “over there.” It is never referred to as what happened “then.” Israeli writer Avraham Burg sees the Holocaust as the central reality for Israel—infesting every aspect of daily life and even driving government policy:

In our eyes, we are still partisan fighters, ghetto rebels, shadows in the camps, no matter the nation, state, armed forces, gross domestic product, or international standing. The Shoah is our life, and we will not forget it and we will not let anyone forget us. We have pulled the Shoah out of its historic context and turned it into a plea and a generator for every deed. All is compared to the Shoah, dwarfed by the Shoah, and therefore all is allowed—be it fences, sieges,...curfews, food and water deprivation, or unexplained killings...Everything seems dangerous to us... (2008, 78)

Rose observes that this Jewish worldview stretches far back in history to medieval times, to the Jewish mystical tradition of the kabbalah. Citing scholar Gershom Scholem, Rose observes that the kabbalah arose as a response to the infamous Chmielnitzki massacres in eastern Europe of the seventeenth century, as a way to make “historic destitution supremely meaningful” (2005, 137). These were dark times, times of profound suffering and insecurity for the Jewish communities of eastern Europe. Kabbalistic writings that spoke to the people about a time in which they would not only be relieved from their suffering and insecurity, but elevated to a glorious, triumphant, and blessed state gained wide acceptance. In this way the exile and suffering of the Jewish people took on cosmic significance. Modern political Zionism, therefore, although purportedly a secular movement, was mystically tinged. This visionary character, submits Rose, fundamentally influenced the tenor and direction of political Zionism. Palestine was not so much a real place as an ideal framed in messianic terms. Modern Zionists, both religious and secular, adopted the language of kabbalah. Rose quotes Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief rabbi of modern Palestine and spiritual mentor of today’s religious right wing: “The anticipation of redemption is the force which keeps exilic Judaism alive, and the Judaism of the land of Israel is salvation itself” (Kook 1963).

Rose’s analysis may seem radical—but it goes far to explain the madness being pursued today by the State of Israel in defiance of international law and ultimately against its own interests. Unfortunately, when one calls it messianism, as Rose does, one risks weakening the argument, since the word calls up images of extremism, religious frenzy, fanaticism, and the End of Days. Yet what do we have here but a fervent desire for redemption and relief from misery, fear, and helplessness? As Burg has pointed out, the messianically tinged need for rescue and redemption born from extreme persecution persists, regardless of historical reality and the present political context. It can be detected, as the fundamental principle, in virtually every argument for and defense of the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. It matters little whether the source

is liberal-progressive or conservative. We will see in coming chapters how even Christian writers have come to endorse some of the flavor and meaning of this Jewish yearning for redemption.

Jewish Empowerment: A Liberal Defense

Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg epitomizes the postwar, Zionist liberal Jewish establishment. His work provides an important counterpoint to Rose's probing critique. Hertzberg's 1959 *The Zionist Idea* became a classic textbook for Jews and non-Jews alike. Although critical of Jewish triumphalism after the 1967 war, near the end of his life (he died in 2006), Hertzberg took on the task of defending Zionism against critics from the Jewish Left. In so doing he adopted the pose of neither polemicist nor apologist, but rather of a man offering a balanced, fair perspective, willing to criticize Israel and Zionism when criticism was deserved. Hertzberg also presented himself as a religious Jew who nevertheless repudiated a Zionism mixed with religion. The subtitle for his 2003 book *The Fate of Zionism: A Secular Future for Israel and Palestine* is an expression of this point of view. According to Hertzberg, if Israel is to survive and Zionism is to fulfill its purpose, Israel must take its place among the nations of the world, unfettered by religious underpinnings or objectives. This, of course, meant that he had to mount an argument against the viewpoint that Zionism is in any way messianic. In the book Hertzberg firmly repudiates any messianic belief or feeling in his commitment to Zionism: "I never believed," he writes, "that any version of Zionist ideology offered the Jews a radical, messianic solution to the long-standing misery of being a persecuted minority almost everywhere in the world" (179).

Yet, does not the same self-image of the Jew as eternally vulnerable and threatened that fueled Jewish messianism shine through in this statement? Hertzberg's liberal pronouncements, supported by his own well-informed and intelligent analysis of Zionist history and current Israeli politics, are not balanced. They paper over the same exceptionalist ideology exposed by Rose and

others. Hertzberg, like other progressive Jewish thinkers, fervently wants to frame Zionism in a positive, humanitarian light. Hertzberg's work is probably the best example of an argument for Israel that approaches being convincing, because he works hard not to appear partisan or argumentatively "pro-Israel." But, as we will see, in his work the fundamentals of a Zionist ideology that grants supremacy to Jewish claims survive intact.

Hertzberg opens *The Fate of Zionism* with a recounting of David Ben-Gurion's startling 1967 speech to Israel's then-dominant Labor Party. It was several weeks after the conclusion of the Six-Day War, in which Israel took possession of the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), Gaza, the Sinai, and the Golan Heights. In that speech Ben-Gurion warned that if Israel did not *immediately* return all the territory it had gained in the war, it was headed for disaster. The reader is thus disarmed: here is a man, one might assume, who is prepared to take on Israel, and perhaps Zionism itself! This, however, would be incorrect. In fact, the book is a frontal attack on Israel's detractors—branding them as "leftist" intellectuals all too willing to condemn Israel while ignoring human rights abuses elsewhere in the world. Hertzberg then employs the tried-and-true straw man maneuver, presenting the radical fundamentalist fringe in Israel as the element that must be defeated in favor of the moderate, gentler Zionists. Under its progressive, "balanced" surface, Hertzberg's book offers up a defense of Jewish supremacy in historic Palestine.

Herzberg is attempting to criticize Jewish empowerment while justifying it at the same time. He stands by the standard Zionist narrative—that the state is the necessary answer to anti-Semitism and to the continuing reality of the Jews as an "embattled minority"—while posing as a critic of Israel at the same time. By taking us back to 1967, he's bringing into service the favorite argument of Jewish progressives: "It's the occupation, stupid." Ben-Gurion, he maintains, was prophetic in his dire warnings about holding on to territories captured in 1967. It would be the occupation, goes this argument, that would spoil the grand experiment and destroy the Zionist dream. Ben-Gurion, Hertzberg writes, "saw

that the Zionism he had helped fashion in the early years of the twentieth century, a movement whose main goal was the creation and support of a Jewish national state in Palestine, was being overlaid after June 1967 with Israeli triumphalism and myths about the advent of a messianic age” (ix). Zionism, he feared, “was being replaced by a new—and false—religion” (xi).

These are important points, but Hertzberg is rewriting history here. Yes, it can be said that the lightning-fast, total victory of 1967 produced a euphoria and triumphalism that had not been widely apparent before. But it is becoming increasingly clear that these qualities of triumphalism and messianism were present and active in the envisioning and the actual establishment of the Jewish state long before the 1967 military victory. In 1967, these qualities surfaced with striking clarity and force, and have since dominated the political landscape. But the expansionism that was unleashed in 1967 was and continues to be the legitimate child of the settler colonial Zionist project. There is no recognition here that the occupation is the faithful continuation of the actions that helped give birth to the Jewish state. Like the violence and racism of the settler movement, the occupation is used by proponents of political Zionism as a straw man: *This is not us*, runs the argument. *This is not the real Israel, the good, democratic Israel, the humanitarian, prophetic Zionism. This is an unfortunate development that we moral Zionists repudiate.*

A Secular Messianism

In his argument for what he calls an approach that leaves religion out of the equation, Hertzberg sets up messianism as yet another straw man. The coming of the Jewish state, protests Hertzberg, would not herald an end of days or a radical transformation of Jewish life. “Only some Jews,” he predicts, “would return to Zion [*sic*], and others would choose to remain in the Diaspora even as they would be thrilled for, supportive of, and identified with those who were rebuilding a homeland for the entire Jewish people” (179). Here is Diaspora Jewry having its cake and

eating it too. Jews can continue their comfortable existence in the West, even while enjoying the quasi-messianic reality of the notion of a “homeland” for the “entire Jewish people.” The existence of this “rebuilt” homeland changes the coloring of Jewish life everywhere. What Hertzberg gives us is a secular messianism: a solution to the Jew’s “long-standing misery.” Zionism and its realization in the State of Israel is, in his words, “an instrument of survival and regeneration in a tragic century” (180). Furthermore, this solution is not limited to a response to the Holocaust; rather, it projects into the future: “These were the purposes that it served throughout the twentieth century, and these are the purposes that Zionism continues to serve” (180). Apparently, therefore, the misery of being a persecuted minority is not over. In his concluding chapter, Hertzberg writes, “The state of Israel is the guarantee that Jews, indeed, will have somewhere to go” (180). It is also a matter of what he calls our “cultural survival: “If Israel were no more, the Jews, and the world as a whole, would lose the national home in which Jews wrestle on their own terms with the moral and spiritual problems of modern life” (180).

Hertzberg thus repudiates any notion of a messianic strain in Zionism, yet he endorses in an unqualified way the fact of Israel as a “homeland.” But where is the differentiator between these concepts? The very notion of “homeland” is built on the conviction of a need for such a thing: this is the heart and the bedrock of Zionism. It is the solution to the Jewish problem—“the long-standing misery of being a persecuted minority almost everywhere in the world” (179). Thus the liberal argument for political Zionism takes us, tragically, not toward a future of security and coexistence, but circling back into our experience of helplessness and victimization. It resurrects the messianically tinged urge for a homeland. This, as documented by Rose and others, was a fundamental component of Zionism from its early days. We see it operating today in the colonialist policies of the state and in the support of world Jewry for these policies. An essential component of this core belief underlying Zionism is what Marc Ellis has identified as the myth of Jewish

innocence. This is an essential element of Jewish sensibility, related to what Ellis calls our “liturgy of destruction”—the Jewish preoccupation with vulnerability and victimhood. It has the effect of making only our suffering important and erasing that of others, *even when the others’ suffering is caused by us*. The interests of the Jews always occupy center stage; the experience or point of view of others is secondary. Ellis points out that even when Jewish theologians attempt to grapple directly with the question of Israel/Palestine, this theme emerges strongly, revealing the same ethnocentricity and willingness to put the responsibility for violence on the other, in this case the Palestinians. He quotes progressive orthodox Jewish theologian Irving Greenberg: “The Palestinians will have to earn their power by living peacefully and convincing Israel of their beneficence or by acquiescing to a situation in which Israel’s strength guarantees that the Arabs cannot use their power to endanger Israel” (Greenberg 1981, 26).

Is it any wonder that peace is so elusive? Has this not been the position taken by Israel, supported fully by Israel’s U.S. “broker” pursuing “negotiations” with Palestinian “partners”? Our worldview—our attitude toward the other—is so totally conditioned by our sense of our entitlement, undergirded by the *idée fixe* of our eternal victimhood, that we cannot see the other except as a threat that must be neutralized. We are ever vigilant. This is our lens. It even lets us fool ourselves into thinking that this very reality is otherwise, that we are the world’s universalists *par excellence*.

Jewish suffering continues to trump all other considerations of justice, fairness, or universalism. Hertzberg is calling for a secularism and a universalism based, he claims, on biblical tradition, but his commitment to Zionism contradicts all that. He invokes the great Jewish sage Hillel, who taught that “what is hateful to you, you should not do to the other” (Hertzberg, 182). But in the same breath he calls for a Jewish state, which exists as a haven for Jews in case of some undetermined future Jewish emergency. These are incompatible goals. Any claim that Hertzberg could make that he is presenting a balanced perspective falls away midway through

the book when he advances two of the favorite arguments of the “pro-Israel” camp. The first is that Palestinians are not a “real” people—that the designation and concept of “Palestinian” arose only as a reaction to the Jewish settlement in the mid-twentieth century. Any competing or prior claim to the land on the part of the so-called Palestinians, therefore, is not valid. It is Golda Meir’s famous 1969 statement about the Palestinians as a people: “They never existed.” The second argument implies that criticism of Israel’s human rights record is but thinly disguised anti-Semitism; that such charges, although factually based, betray a pernicious bias against Israel. Why, goes this reasoning, is there such “near hysteria,” to quote Hertzberg (2003, 110), about Israel, when Saddam Hussein of Iraq, Hafez Assad of Syria, and Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir of Sudan are responsible for the massacre of tens of thousands of their own citizens?

These arguments reveal the true intent of Hertzberg’s project, which is to invalidate and stifle any real dialogue about the future of Israel in the Middle East by dismissing criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic. Is it not foolish, even unforgivable, to reduce this discussion to a comparison of which conflict is bloodier or which dictator more appallingly cruel? The establishment of the State of Israel and the subsequent denial of equal rights to the Palestinians within and from 1948 Israel and, more recently, within the occupied West Bank and Gaza represent one of the most blatant, systematic violations of human rights by one government of an entire people in the world today. It began with a two-year campaign of ethnic cleansing still unacknowledged by the West. This was followed by a colonial project of dispossession and control that has continued for more than sixty years, financially and politically supported by the greatest power in the world.

Hertzberg’s self-presentation as a scholar dedicated to a frank critique of Zionism and a return to a reasonable, “secular” approach to the Jewish state doesn’t hold up. Here are his true colors: immediately following the “what about Saddam Hussein” argument, having now established that criticism of Israel is self-evidently biased, he presents us with this final judgment

on the matter. “The source of Arab’s anger,” he concludes, “is that they are at war with the Jews. The source of the anger in the West is that the Western liberals and leftists are at war with themselves” (111).

“It’s Us or Them”

Turning from Hertzberg’s purportedly progressive stance, it is almost a relief to consider the blatantly partisan pronouncements of the “pro-Israel” Jewish organizations. Morton Klein is president of the Zionist Organization of America, one of the oldest and most vociferously and militantly Zionist organizations on the American scene. On October 23, 2008, the following editorial by Klein was published by JTA, “The Global News Service of the Jewish People.” Entitled “Palestinian Statehood Not the Answer,” Klein’s piece states that “only when the Palestinians demonstrate acceptance of Israel as a Jewish state will negotiations produce peace, not bloodshed.” Citing statistics that show thousands of Israelis killed and maimed since “negotiations” began in 1993, and polls showing a majority of Palestinians in support of terrorist and missile attacks on Israel, the article goes on to describe a “cult of suicide bombing and martyrdom” that has been inculcated in Palestinian youth since the Palestinian Authority was established in 1993 through the Oslo Accords. Klein then repeats the myth of the multiple Western and Israeli “offers” for Palestinian statehood, beginning with the Peel Commission in 1937, through the UN Partition Plan of 1947, and the Clinton-Barak offer of 2000, all “rejected” by the Palestinians. The conclusion, of course, is that the Palestinians have never been in favor of a state of their own alongside Israel. Rather, “more than their own state, Palestinians want victory in the form of Israel’s demise.”

It is difficult to understand how, in the fall of 2008—in the midst of the last-ditch effort of the Bush administration to broker peace, and in the wake of Israeli Prime Minister Olmert’s astonishing warning that if hopes for a two-state solution were to collapse, Israel “is finished”—something like this could be published by an

organization claiming to represent the interests of the Jewish people. How else can we understand this but in the following way: here we have, preserved and persistent, the core of Zionism—the preoccupation with Jewish vulnerability and suffering, and the sense of entitlement to the land. Key to the maintenance of this belief system is an insistence on blaming the other: the violence originates only from *their* hatred and hostility. We are under attack by an enemy that hates us and wants to annihilate us. Naturally, one cannot negotiate with or talk to such an enemy.

It is becoming increasingly clear to what extent Israel's leaders and their supporters in the West need these "enemies" in order to support the validity of this belief system. Here is David Harris, Executive Director of the American Jewish Committee, writing in the organization's e-zine on October 19, 2008:

There are real-life dangers to the Jewish people. They're not concocted, as some would suggest, by fear-mongering organizations or elderly Jews who see anti-Semites everywhere they look. They exist and need to be exposed and confronted.

How much clearer can Iran be in desiring a world without Israel? How many more times do Hamas and Hezbollah spokesmen have to refer to Jews as "the sons of monkeys and pigs" before they're taken seriously? How much more unfairly does Israel have to be treated in the UN to recognize that no other country in the world "enjoys" the same status? How many more conspiracy theories about Jews staying home on 9/11, Lehman Brothers' partners hoarding billions in Israel, or American Jews controlling U.S. foreign policy must be circulated to grasp that there are those who wish us ill?³

There are progressive Zionists who would protest that these examples are extreme and that in offering them I am presenting a biased picture of the current pro-Israel position. They will argue

3. It is interesting to consider that right-winger Benjamin Netanyahu came into power in the 2009 Israeli elections partially on the strength of this fear of Iran's threat to annihilate Israel through a nuclear attack.

that many American Jews are sympathetic to the Palestinians, who have without question suffered at our hands and deserve to have a state of their own. I would counter that the attitudes presented in these statements by American Zionist organizations accurately describe the core beliefs—one could even say principles—of Zionism. They persist, unmodified by those Jews who seek to soften or qualify them with appeals to considerations of justice, fairness, or the human rights of those we have wronged. They continue to determine the actions of the State of Israel and the financial and political support of those actions by the mainstream Jewish community in the United States.

The proof is in the policies. The proof is evident to anyone who sees the occupation. Israel does not want to share. Israel wants the Palestinians to go.

Joining the Human Family

Increasingly, voices are emerging from the Jewish community, voices raised in opposition, even protest, against the Zionist program. This is not new—in the years before the birth of the state, giants such as philosopher Martin Buber and Hebrew University chancellor Judah Magnes cried out against the idea of a Jewish state. But these voices were silenced in the aftermath of the Holocaust and with the victory of Jewish forces in defending the newly established state. In our day, however, these voices have reemerged in the statements and published writings of academics, journalists, and social critics. We would be hard-pressed to find a voice more uncompromising and direct than that of Professor Joel Kovel. Kovel's *Overcoming Zionism* came out in 2007 to a resounding lack of reviews except in the leftist press. His central premise was that Judaism's tribal core is responsible for Zionism, which he calls "the curse of Judaism." Kovel writes:

The theological reflex of being a people apart is known as the Covenant, a kind of promise bestowed by Yahweh...Obedience to a peremptory or guilt-inducing inner voice is a distinctive aspect of Judaic being, both a product of apartness and a

reinforcement for apartness. It leads into a kind of moral universe where the dictates of the tribe and those of the universal deity can be conflated, especially under circumstances in which the larger society reinforces the separation of Jews from others by law or persecution. When that happens, . . . then being apart and being chosen as exceptional became one and the same; spiritual greatness and collective narcissism flow together . . . if one's ethical reference point is the tribal unit, then all others are devalued, and one no longer belongs to humanity but sets oneself over humanity. This dilemma is to haunt Zionism once its state is formed and its logic of conquest put Jews in the driver's seat. *But it is much older than Zionism.* (20; emphasis added)

In Kovel's view, if you sign on to the idea of Jewish state, "you are taking the particularism which is the potential bane of any state, mixing it with the exceptionalism which is the actual bane of Judaism, and giving racism an objective, enduring, institutionalized, and obdurate character" (165).

Kovel's analysis, uncompromising and, it must be said, merciless as it is, puts Zionism in its proper perspective. It is not comfortable. It makes us squirm. It doesn't let us off the hook. Kovel's unblinking look at Zionism and its relation to the tribal origins of Judaism also allows him to see the prophets in a realistic frame. He honors the power of their vision, but sees also the limitations, given the tribal framework in which they operated. Accordingly, he credits Christianity for taking the next step. When the reality of these tribal elements of Judaism is acknowledged, Judaism's discontinuity with Christianity is revealed in its simple clarity. Kovel is drawn back to the first century, to the actions of that Jewish prophet and social reformer of two thousand years ago: "Isaiah was the greatest Old Testament prophet; but the greatest prophet of all . . . was Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was authentically Jewish and yet a breaking point in the history of Judaism, which becomes defined thereafter by those Jews who did not follow him. Jesus was that Jew who made the Covenant universal by dissolving its tribal shell and extending it to all humanity" (32).

In the coming chapters, we will return, in the company of contemporary Christian theologians and scholars, to Palestine of the first century. The political reality that drove the events of that time will provide the framework for understanding the challenges and opportunities facing us today.

Jewish liberation theologian Marc Ellis sets out what those challenges are. Like Jacqueline Rose, Ellis confronts the disturbing consequences of Jewish empowerment, and seeks to help us understand what drives us, what has brought us to this pass. Ellis is urgently concerned about Jewish survival. For him, however, the question is not how to preserve Jewish security in the face of a hostile world, but how Judaism in the twenty-first century can overcome the effects of having *succeeded* in achieving power and overcoming chronic victimization. Ellis echoes Walter Brueggemann and other Christian theologians who understand the role of prophecy as opposing oppressive social systems. Jews today, maintains Ellis, must find their prophetic voice in order to counteract the destructive effect of political and military success. “Will the Jewish prophetic voice survive Jewish empowerment?” he asks. “Will the prophetic word break through the numbness of the Jewish community? Can it transform the power of the Israeli state to the homeland vision of Judah Magnes and Hannah Arendt?” (2004, 205).

For Ellis, in contrast to proponents of Zionism like Hertzberg, the valence on the word “homeland” is not on the physical haven, but on the concept of coexistence in a Palestine shared with others in a pluralistic, truly democratic society. In support of this, Ellis cites the 1981 essay by Israeli journalist and author Boas Evron, “The Holocaust: Learning the Wrong Lessons.” Evron takes issue with the notion that Israel exists to save Jews from another Holocaust, and that the lesson of “never again” somehow ties Israel and the necessity for a Jewish homeland to the Holocaust. He challenges the fundamental assumption, sometimes implicit and more often explicit, that the Holocaust gives meaning to Israel (i.e., protection from extermination), and Israel gives meaning (i.e., redemption) to the Holocaust.

We must learn a different lesson from the Holocaust, asserts Ellis, quoting Evron: “The true guarantee against ideologically-based extermination is not military power and sovereignty but the *eradication of ideologies which remove any human group from the family of humanity*” (Evron 1981, 18; emphasis added). For Evron, continues Ellis, “the solution lies in a common struggle aimed at overcoming national differences and barriers, rather than increasing and heightening them as strong trends within Israel and the Zionist movement demand” (2004, 54).

Ellis is adamantly opposed to any role for religion allied with power, what he terms—using the prototypical Christian example—Constantinian. He prescribes this for all religious groups, not only the Jews, and shares a vision for the future in which traditional boundaries will be secondary to a common cause for social justice:

Constantinian Christianity has now been joined by Constantinian Judaism. Constantinian Islam is also a reality. Yet there are Christians, Jews, and Muslims who also oppose and suffer under Constantinianism. Could it be that those who participate in Constantinian religiosity—whether Jew, Christian or Muslim—are, in effect, practicing the same religion, albeit with different symbol structures and rituals? And that those who seek community are also practicing the same religion?...Movements of justice and compassion across community and religious boundaries may be the vehicles for a better understanding of commonalities in religiosity that can no longer be defined by traditional religious labels. (217)

Ellis makes a compelling and passionate case for a renewal of Jewish life and theology based on the best of our tradition. In the course of this, he challenges the idea of a Jewish state as central—even necessary—for Jewish survival, both physical and spiritual. He writes: “A practicing Jew within the liberationist perspective sees Israel as neither central nor peripheral, but rather as a necessary and flawed attempt to create an autonomous Jewish presence within the Middle East” (214). In Ellis’s view, contemporary

mainstream Judaism, having adopted as its credo and its mission staunch support for Israel as a political haven for Jews, is on the wrong course. Those, like Ellis, who oppose the Constantinian direction that Judaism has taken, have chosen to be “in exile from mainstream Jewish life” (206). I understand Ellis’s evocation of the image of exile for the experience of contemporary Jews who choose to forgo allegiance to the Zionist doctrine—I feel the pain of this condition myself. But I also feel reluctant to embrace the notion of exile as a unifying concept or identity. Exile may describe well the loss of attachment or belonging to a location or previously held sense of self—but does not exile thrust one into a wider landscape of identity and place? Ellis himself lays out a picture of a possible future that beckons. It is a future toward which not only the Jewish people, but the whole of humankind must strive, “a broader tradition of faith...with other struggling communities in a common struggle for liberation” (207). For Ellis this life of community is what we must strive for, in which religious identities may be preserved, but where these boundaries and idioms are secondary. Zionism has led the Jewish people, and humankind with it, not toward but away from this vision of community.