## EXPANDED ISSUE

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41/680 May 2011/lyar 5771



A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

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As time passes, history changes. Sometimes this also means changes in the very words we use to describe the past and its intersection with today — Indians (now Native Americans), Negros (until recently, blacks, now African-Americans). A few decades ago, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir insisted that the only Palestinians were Israeli Jews. Now the Likud-elected Israeli leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, publicly supports the creation of a separate Palestinian Arab state alongside Israel — a political stance full of historical implications regarding the future of Jews and Arabs since the fateful 1967 War.

This issue of *Sh'ma* takes a multifaceted look at what it means to reflect on and evaluate history — especially with regard to the way we celebrate Israel Independence Day each May.

Israel today, both inside and outside its borders, is more than ever before a contested place. Its polity remains starkly divided over issues of war and peace, religion and politics, and the conflicting risks of reconciliation and occupation. Not surprisingly, the best way to acknowledge Israel's birth and achievements is in itself a matter of contention. In this issue, we air a wide range of views about how to tell Israel's story — that is, how to situate history between myth and counter-myth. —S.B.

## A War of Many Names: Teaching Israel's History

ILAN TROEN

t is hardly surprising that the bitter conflict out of which the State of Israel emerged is now being further contested through competing terms: "the War of Independence," "the Nakba," and "the 1948 War." Embedded in each term are markedly different interpretations of the past that also relate to scenarios for the future. Revolutionary moments readily become subjects for challenging as well as changing narratives with differing interpretations expressed in nomenclature.

For those teaching the history of the Jewish state, it is no longer possible to employ without

qualification the traditional term: "War of Independence." A powerful Palestinian perspective has emerged that demands acknowledgement of the same event as "the Nakba," or "the Catastrophe." Recently, some

scholars seem to prefer "the 1948 War." However, even this apparently neutral term does not resolve all issues.

The 1948 War did not begin with the Declaration of Israeli Independence on May 14, 1948. While one could argue that it began in stages, immediately after the United Nations vote on the partition of Palestine on November 29, 1947, the Jewish-Arab conflict actually began much

earlier, erupting in violent episodes of political and actual combat. Ignoring these preludes would be like teaching that the American Revolution began only in 1776 without considering all that preceded it. (Some have even claimed that the American Revolution began when the first Englishman set foot on Indian North America, an event perhaps akin to when early Zionists established the first colonies in the 1880s.)

For all that, the beginning of this crucial episode of the Arab-Israeli conflict is easier to determine than its conclusion. While the last armistice between Israel and some Arab states

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was signed in July 1949, several Arab countries, notably Iraq, never agreed to the armistice. Then, too, an armistice does not mean peace and recognition but only a suspension of armed conflict. In fact, fighting continued through the 1956 Sinai Campaign in one form or another. There were confrontations between Israeli and Jordanian and Egyptian forces as well as retaliation raids for attacks by the *fedayeen*,



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<sup>1</sup> The English version of Zureik's work on the Nakba was first published in 1956 by the American Council of Learned Societies.

Palestinian infiltrators or, literally, those who sacrifice. Nevertheless, we can expect the name "the 1948 War" to continue to gain currency if only because it has the appearance of neutrality and it parallels terms like "the 1967 June War," "the 1973 Yom Kippur War" and so on. Dates suggest objectivity.

The concern with avoiding bias reflects a deep and admirable commitment to ensuring that teaching history does not devolve into advocacy. This intention is expressed in the growing attention to what is widely termed "parallel narratives." Proper instruction of complex issues with conflicting interpretations requires offering multiple perspectives. This approach is more honest than attempting to achieve a single, comprehensive, and "true" account to satisfy all observers. After all, as in nature and in geometry, parallel lines never meet. Rather than trying to resolve differences, appreciating each other's rationale can lead to a healthy sympathy even without agreement.

Achieving constructive and empathetic balance has been complicated by the notion of Nakba. First popularized by Constantine Zureik, the Damascus Christian Arab intellectual and diplomat, in Al Manah El Nakbah (the meaning of the disaster),1 the term "Nakba" initially focused on the failure of Arab governments and armies to vanquish the nascent Jewish state, not on the devastation that befell the Arabs of Palestine. Zureik's anger was directed primarily toward his fellow Arabs. He does not dwell on the actions of Jews but accords them "terrifying strength." Commentators later focused on the sins of the victorious Jews, especially their responsibility for the flight of the Palestinians and the canard of systematic "ethnic cleansing." But neither early nor recent accounts of the Nakba include self-criticism or critique for rejecting the United Nation's decision on the partition of Palestine with all-out violence. War was and remains justified; Palestinians were/are victims who bear no responsibility for their situation. What happened to them is the fault of others.

This claim of passivity is demonstrably inaccurate but instrumentally useful. The mantle of victimhood places responsibility on Israel to undo the "sin" or "injustice" of the past by acknowledging guilt through compensation and allowing the return of the refugees and their descendents. In short, this use of the Nakba serves political rather than academic ends by charging one side with exclusive responsibility and casting resolution in terms that would terminate a Jewish state.

In contrast, the Israeli narrative — more so in recent years — has become multivocal. Even during the war, there was appreciation that armed conflicts are violent and can give rise to unethical behavior with tragic results. In this vein, the young Hebrew writer S. Yizhar (Yizhar Smilansky) wrote a number of stories during the war that dealt with battlefield ethics and the expulsion of Arab villagers. His stories and the moral questions they raise were publicly debated then and have since been integrated into the national school curriculum. The conduct of the war continues to be a subject of academic investigation in its totality and in individual instances. Israel's War of Independence has not been reduced to a single, triumphant and uncomplicated account. The Nakba, too, requires new investigation and examination.

Univocal and unvariegated narratives, whether of passive victimhood or self-righteous celebration, can be taught in isolation. The challenge of presenting the 1948 War, like much else in the long and continuing Israeli-Arab conflict, requires communicating an appreciation for complexity. Those who read historical events based on neat paradigms and absolute, a priori judgments deprive their students of the crucial opportunity to explore and learn from the untidy complications of human experience.

## **Terms for Reading**

Balfour Declaration: Issued by the British in November 1917 in support of a Jewish national home in Palestine. The Balfour Declaration was the first formal, governmental recognition of real importance bestowed on the Zionist movement.

Partition Plan: An idea aired by the British during the Mandate period, the partition plan was never implemented, largely because of Arab resistance. The Arabs proposed the creation of a Jewish polity far smaller than the one that came into existence in 1948.

The Irgun: This Zionist paramilitary group was associated with but not subordinate to the Revisionist movement, which operated in Palestine from 1931 to 1948.

Lehi: A militant Zionist group operating in Palestine between 1940 and 1948, Lehi aimed to evict the British and form a Jewish state.

Bi-nationalism: This refers to a single Palestinian state in which neither Jews nor Arabs would dominate and in which both would mutually govern. Within the Zionist movement, bi-nationalism was supported by a small number of Jewish intellectuals, including Martin Buber and the organization Ichud.

Two-state Solution: Once a position claimed by the Israeli left, the idea of a twostate solution is now accepted, at least nominally, by most Israeli political leaders, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. It sees the existence of two states, Jewish and Palestinian, in the land between Jordan and the Mediterranean, with their boundaries still to be determined.

War of Attrition: This refers to the limited war fought between Israel and Egypt from 1967 to 1970.