

Martin Buber's Bi-Nationalism

SAMUEL HAYIM BRODY

You hesitate, you doubt — you know from history that each unchaining is answered by new chaining? You do not understand, then, that history no longer holds. —Martin Buber

In the spring of 1949, Martin Buber walked into a Jerusalem store whose owner had in the past expressed solidarity with Buber's generally unpopular support of a bi-nationalist solution to the Zionist-Arab conflict. This time though, with almost a year having passed since the War of 1948 and the establishment of the State of Israel, the tenor of the conversation was different. "An utter political rout like the one your circle suffered is no common thing," the shopkeeper said to Buber. "It looks as if you'll have to face the facts and resign yourselves to total silence for the time being." The shopkeeper was saying that Buber's circle had suffered something more than an ordinary setback — that history itself, by establishing the State of Israel in the manner it had, had rendered the bi-nationalists obsolete, and had decreed their irrelevance.

Buber recounted this story in a speech he delivered to a meeting of the Ichud, one of the more prominent bi-nationalist organizations in Palestine in the 1940s. The speech was called "Should the Ichud Accept the Decree of History?" Answering that question meant defining what, exactly, History-with-a-capital-H had just decided against, and what it had left open. In other words, the creation of the State of Israel was to be accepted as a *fait accompli* — but of what kind?

Even before the establishment of the state, the Ichud had carefully defined bi-nationalism as but a means to the ends of Zionism. Because of this, they did not consider themselves utterly defeated by the events of 1948. "We aim at a social structure based on the reality of two peoples living together," Buber had written in 1947. "But this program is only a temporary adaptation of our path to the concrete, historical situation — it is not necessarily the path itself." The pre-state period, of course, was the era of (Balfour) declarations and (white) papers and (Biltmore) programs; it was the time when each group could proclaim its grand vision and contend for its realization, as if politics was really a matter of building from a blueprint. Buber attempted to skirt this dogmatic trend by keeping his focus on the goal of Zionism itself: not statehood, per se, not independence for its own sake, but only as a means to fulfill the

divinely ordained Jewish task of initiating the realization of justice on earth.

From that perspective, Buber asserted, "The cry of victory does not have the power of preventing the clear-eyed from seeing that the soul of the Zionist enterprise has evaporated.... What sober and honest man, looking about himself in today's reality, could say that we are

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engaged in a process of regeneration?" If the establishment of the state had in fact achieved the goal of Zionism, the shopkeeper would have been right that the Ichud had been rendered irrelevant. But, in reality, the goal seemed further away than ever. "Yes, a goal has been reached, but it is not called Zion...[The] day will yet come when the victorious march of which our people is so proud today will seem to us like a cruel detour."

Of course, up to that point, the primary political tradition in Zionism had been the Labor movement, descended from Herzl's "political" Zionism; it saw the primary goal of Zionism as statehood for the protection of Jewish bodies and independence for the protection of Jewish honor. Influenced as well by European socialist tendencies, it certainly strove to establish internal justice in the laws of the Jewish state and conceived itself as dealing with the Arabs as justly as possible — with the proviso that just dealings with the Arabs could never be subordinated to the need for physical security. But even this need, Buber alleged, even this supposedly non-utopian, limited goal of Zionism could never be met along the path chosen by the Zionist mainstream: "The might of battalions is decisive only temporarily." And indeed, Revisionist predictions that an Israeli iron wall would wear down Palestinian Arab determination to struggle against Zionism do not seem any likelier to be realized today than 80 years ago. Meanwhile the two-state solution, the supposedly limited, non-utopian goal of all good moderates, seems no more or less utopian than any other settlement that calls itself a solution.

Since the heyday of the bi-nationalist

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movement, significant intellectual and historical shifts have colluded to prevent its re-emergence. Firstly, bi-nationalism was a product of the same intellectual environments that produced 19th- and 20th-century European nationalisms themselves, which asserted that the world was divided into distinct peoples defined by shared language and territory. Its principle of duality sought to acknowledge the reality of two peoples in Palestine while eliminating the standard nation-state's numerical determination of power according to majority and minority. However, after 1948 and 1967, as favor for a single-state solution migrated from being the living motivating force of a small Zionist far-left to being the polemical watchword of a non-Zionist and anti-Zionist far left, it also assumed the usual characteristics of a non-nationalist liberalism. This is the background behind the early-'90s post-Zionist call for Israel to be a "state of all its citizens." This has produced a strange polemical situation in which two sides

each perceive the other as atavistic: The post-Zionists see the entire Zionist spectrum, from parties such as Yahad to Yisrael Beiteinu, as imprisoned by an obsolete 19th-century nationalist vision, while Zionist ideology continues to regard assimilationist liberalism as precisely the outdated worldview that Zionism originally emerged to correct. Meanwhile, the original religious underpinnings of the bi-nationalist idea have been phased out and replaced with a thoroughgoing secular framework. This may have contributed to the current reputation of the single-state solution as the solution nobody wants. If there is to be a renewed "bi-nationalism," in the sense of an approach to living together based on the reality of two peoples sharing the land, it will likely be forced to draw on the resources of Judaism and Islam. Here too, both skeptics and adherents to conventional wisdom should be asked to defend the record of their own purportedly sober and realistic approaches to conflict resolution.



Israel's War of Liberation, 1944-1948

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The founding myth of the Herut movement, which in 1973 evolved into the Likud and, with a plurality of Knesset seats in 1977, facilitated Menachem Begin's ascendancy to the position of Prime Minister of Israel, was that in its pre-state form — as the Irgun underground — it had expelled the British from Mandate Palestine. This claim was derided by the hegemonic socialist Zionist factions that dominated Israel's political scene until 1967. They treated the Irgun and the Lehi (another militant Zionist group) derisively as "dissidents." For decades, Israel's schoolchildren never read that in early 1944 an armed revolt was declared against the mandatory regime, ultimately, over the course of four years, forcing the British to leave. Oddly enough, it was the British government, in a white paper published on May 15, 1948, that had recorded the circumstances that forced it to decide to bring to an end its mandate and to prepare for the withdrawal from Palestine of all British forces. In this official version, we read that:

...84,000 troops, who received no cooperation from the Jewish community, had proved insufficient to maintain law and order in the face of a campaign of terrorism waged by highly organized Jewish forces equipped with all the weapons of the modern infantryman. Since the

war, 338 British subjects had been killed in Palestine, while the military forces there had cost the British taxpayer 100 million pounds. The renewal of Arab violence on the announcement of the United Nations decision to partition Palestine and the declared intentions of Jewish extremists showed that the loss of further British lives was inevitable...[The] continued presence there of British troops and officials could no longer be justified. As the British admitted, they were forced to surrender their mandate because of what Winston Churchill referred to in early 1947 as a "squalid, senseless war."

What was obvious to England's Prime Minister Clement Attlee and Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin in 1946-48 was consistently denied for decades after Israel's establishment: Without the armed underground resistance against the British regime in the Land of Israel, initiated and led by the Irgun and Lehi and, during November 1945 to July 1946, joined by the Haganah (another paramilitary group that later became the Israel Defense Forces) and the Palmach (the Haganah's elite strike force), the State of Israel could not have been established at that time. Moreover, if the establishment of the Zionist state had been predicated solely on the creation of more kibbutzim and the bringing in of ships with "illegal" immigrants from Europe — even

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