

Our Promised Land: A Dialogue with Early Zionist Texts

A. D. Gordon, *People and Land*, 1911

In Palestine, we must do with our own hands all the things that make up the sum total of life. We must ourselves do all the work, from the least strenuous, cleanest and most sophisticated to the dirtiest and most difficult. In our own way, we must feel what a worker feels and what a worker thinks – then, and only then, shall we have a culture of our own for then we shall live a life of our own.

Zeev Jabotinsky

"When I met Trumpeldor in 1916 he tried to explain to me the meaning of the concept "Chalutz". He said to me this:

"It is a much wider concept than "marching at the front". Of course we also need workers, but this was never the meaning of the word "Chalutz". We need people who are ready "for everything", for everything that Eretz Yisrael demands. The "worker" has his labour interests, soldiers have the interests of their fellow comrades, the doctor, the engineer and everyone else have their own habits if one can say that. However, we need to create a generation, that will not have interests and will not have habits. Just an iron bar. Flexible – but iron. Underneath, iron from which you can forge everything that is needed for the national machine. Missing a wheel? I am the wheel. Missing a nail, a screw, a block? Take me. Need to dig earth? I am a digger. Need to be a soldier? I am a soldier. Police? Doctor? Lawyers? Teachers? Water drawers? Please, I will do everything. I have no face, no psychology, no emotions, I don't even have a name: I am the pure ideal of service, ready for anything, not bound to do anything; I know only one command: build."

"There aren't people like that" – I said – "There will be."

I was wrong and he was right. The first of the people like that sat in front of me. He himself was like that: lawyer, soldier, worker in the agricultural field. He even came to Tel Hai wanting to work the land. There he found his death by a bullet, he said "It is nothing" and died as an immortal son."

Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State*, 1896

It (the return to Israel) will be carried out entirely in the framework of civilization. We shall not revert to a lower stage; we shall rise to a higher one. We shall not dwell in mud huts; we shall build new, more beautiful, and more modern houses, and possess them in safety. We shall not lose our acquired possessions; we shall realize them. We shall surrender our well-earned rights for better ones. We shall relinquish none of our cherished customs; we shall find them again. We shall not leave our old home until the new one is available. Those only will depart who are sure thereby to improve their lot; those who are desperate will go first, after them the poor, next the well to do, and last of all the wealthy. Those who go first will raise themselves to a higher grade, on a level with that whose representatives will shortly follow. The exodus will thus at the same time be an ascent in class.

Ahad Ha'am, *The Jewish State and the Jewish Problem*, 1897

The material problem will not be ended by the establishment of a Jewish State, and it is, indeed, beyond our power to solve it once and for all [...] Thus we are driven to the conclusion that the real and only basis of Zionism is to be found in another problem, the spiritual one.

Judaism seeks to return to its historic center, where it will be able to live a life developing in a natural way, to bring its powers into play in every department of human culture, to broaden and perfect those national possessions which it has acquired up to now, and thus to contribute to the common stock of humanity, in the future as it has in the past, a great national culture, the fruit of the unhampered activity of a people living by the light of its own spirit. For this purpose Judaism can, for the present, content itself with little. It does not need an independent State, but only the creation in its native land of conditions favorable to its development: a good-sized settlement of Jews working without hindrance in every branch of civilization, from agriculture and handicrafts to science and literature. This Jewish settlement, which will be a gradual growth, will become in course of time the center of the nation, wherein its spirit will find pure expression and develop in all its aspects to the highest degree of perfection of which it is capable. Then, from this center, the spirit of Judaism will radiate to the great circumference, to all the communities of the Diaspora, to inspire them with new life and to preserve the overall unity of our people. When our national culture in Palestine has attained that level, we may be confident that it will produce men in the Land of Israel itself who will be able, at a favorable moment, to establish a State there - one which will be not merely a State of Jews but a really Jewish State.

Vladimir Jabotinsky, *What the Zionist Revisionists Want*, 1926

Our attitude toward the Palestinian Arabs is determined by the full recognition of an objective fact: even after the formation of a Jewish majority a considerable Arab population will always remain in Palestine. If things fare badly for this group of inhabitants then things will fare badly for the entire country. The political, economic and cultural welfare of the Arabs will thus always remain one of the main conditions for the well-being of the land of Israel. In the future Jewish state absolute equality will reign between residents of both peoples, both languages and all religions. All measures must be taken to develop the national autonomy of each of the peoples represented in the country with regard to communal affairs, education, cultural activities and political representation. We believe that in this way the Jewish people in Palestine will in the future be able to convince the Arabs inside and outside the country to reconcile themselves to a Jewish majority in the land of Israel.

It is a dangerous falsehood, however, to present such a reconciliation as an already existing fact. Arab public opinion in Palestine is against the creation of a Jewish majority there. The Arabs will continue to fight for a long time - sometimes energetically and sometimes apathetically, sometimes with political means and sometimes with other means - against all that which leads to the creation of this majority until the moment that the overwhelming might of the Jews in the country, i.e., the Jewish majority, becomes a fact. Only then will true reconciliation commence.

Yehuda Amichai, from *Songs of Zion the Beautiful*

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On the last words of Trumpeldor,
It is good to die for our country, they built
the new homeland, like hornets in crazy
nests.
And even if those were not the words,
Or he never said them, or if he did and they
drifted away,
they are still there, vaulted like a cave. The
cement
has become harder than stone. This is my
homeland
where I can dream without stumbling,
do bad deeds without being damned,
neglect my wife without feeling lonely,
cry without shame, lie and betray
without going to hell for it.

This is the land we covered with field and
forest
but we had no time to cover our faces
so they are naked in the grimace of sorrow
and the ugliness of joy.

This is the land whose dead lie in the
ground
instead of coal and iron and gold:
they are fuel for the coming of messiahs.

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Because of the will of the night, I left the
land
of the setting sun.

I came too late for the cedars, there weren't
any more.

I also came too late for A. D. Gordon, and
most of the swamps
were already drained when I was a child.

But my held-back weeping
hardened the foundations. And my feet,
moving
in desperate joy, did what ploughs do,
and pavers of roads.
And when I became a man, the voice
of Rachel-weeping-for-her-children broke
too.

My thoughts come back to me toward
evening
like those who harvested in the days of
Degania, in dust and joy.
On top of the hay wagon.

Now I live in a city of hills where it gets dark
before it does at the seashore.
And I live in a house that gets dark before it
does outside.
But in my heart, where I really live,
it's always dark.
Perhaps one day there will finally be light
as in the Far North.

Ari Shavit, *My Promised Land*, 2013

So if I were to address some imaginary Zionist congress, what would I say? I'd probably say that the need was real. The insight was genius. The vision was impressive - ambitious but not mad. And the persistence was unique: for over a century, Zionism displayed extraordinary determination, imagination, and innovation. But as Zionism was late and the Holocaust preempted it, its premise of the mass immigration to this land of the Eastern European Jewish peoples turned out to be false. So was the premise regarding feeble Arab resistance. Therefore, the Zionist project did not become what it was supposed to be: a grand, well-planned engineering project like the Suez Canal or the Panama Canal or Dutch land reclamation from the sea. It did not become a grand enterprise of progress that solved in a rational manner one of humanity's ugliest problems. It did not eradicate anti-Semitism in the way that modern medicine eradicated tuberculosis and polio, or solve the problem of the Jews in the way that modern medicine solved the problem of infant mortality. Rather, Zionism became an unruly process of improvising imperfect solutions to acute challenges, addressing new needs, adjusting to new conditions and creating new realities. It reinvented itself again and again, dealing in different ways with what is basically an impossible situation. This is how Zionism wended its way through the twentieth century and this is how it shaped the land.

[...] We probably had to come. And when we came here, we performed wonders. For better or for worse, we did the unimaginable. Our play was the most extravagant of modern plays. The drama was breathtaking. But only the end will properly put the beginning into perspective. Only when we know what has become of the protagonists will we know whether they were right or wrong, whether they overcame the tragic decree or were overcome by it.

There will be no utopia here. Israel will never be the ideal nation it set out to be, nor will it be Europe-away-from-Europe. There will be no London here, no Paris, no Vienna. But what has evolved in this land is not to be dismissed. A series of great revolts has created here a truly free society that is alive and kicking and fascinating. This free society is creative and passionate and frenzied. It gives the ones living here a unique quality of life: warmth, directness, openness. Yes, we are orphans. We have no king and no father. We have no coherent identity and no continuous past. In a sense, we have no civic culture. Our grace is the semibarbaric grace of the wild ones. It is the youthful grace of the unbound and the uncouth. We respect no past and no future and no authority. We are irreverent. We are deeply anarchic. And yet, because we are all alone in this world, we stick together. Because we are orphans, we are brothers in arms.