

# THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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## PART II, LESSON TWO: THE JEWISH SITUATION AND JEWISH NATIONALISM

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About a hundred years ago, Jews underwent a major change in how they thought of themselves. At first a few, and then more, began to call themselves Zionists. Zionism is a term that in its broadest and early sense meant simply the "return" of Jews to their ancestral homeland. That homeland was called Zion (or Israel) and its heart was Jerusalem, known as the "city of Zion."

Many early Zionists were simply pious, nonpolitical, religious Jews who felt they could best practice their faith in the Land of Zion. Some went primarily to pray, to study their religious books, and to await the arrival of the Messiah. Politics played little role in their thinking. By the beginning of the 20th century, however, Zionism came to have a political meaning: that Jews were not just a religious or ethnic group but were a nation of people who should have their own state. Today Zionism is the term for Jewish nationalism.

Not all Jews agree upon what Zionism is, but to the extent there is agreement, it is upon three things: there should be a Jewish state; it should be permanent, independent, and secure; and Jews who are threatened anywhere in the world should be able to go there to be safe. All other issues--the boundaries of the state, the nature of government, relations with the Palestinians, relations with American Jews, religious law--are in dispute.

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### FOUR BACKGROUND FACTORS

To understand why so many Jews decided to leave their various countries and began to think of themselves as a separate nation, we must look at four factors.

#### **Pogroms:**

In Russian-ruled Eastern Europe a hundred years ago when the Zionist movement began, many Jews were forced to live in a restricted area called the Pale of Settlement. (It included parts of Poland, Ukraine, Byelorussia, Lithuania, and other provinces.) According to the 1887 census there were 2.75 million Jews in this area. Half lived in towns and cities, the rest in villages and hamlets called shtetls by Jews. While some were wealthy, most were poor. From 1881 on, Jews were subjected to attacks and massacres known as pogroms. Many pogroms were secretly instigated by government officials who hoped to solve their unemployment and other problems by driving Jews away. The most famous of these massacres occurred in Kishinev in 1903: 45 Jews were killed, 86 wounded, and 1500 stores and homes were destroyed.

As attacks increased, the first strategy of Jews was to escape. Between 1880 and 1920 approximately 2.5

million Jews fled Eastern Europe, of whom 2 million came to America. Most American Jews trace their ancestry to those migrants. Below is the rate at which Jews left Eastern Europe during the period before World War I.

Year	Number Leaving Eastern Europe		
1830-70	1,000	--	4,000 per year
1871-80	8,000	--	10,000 per year
1881-90	50,000	--	60,000 per year
1901-14	150,000	--	160,000 per year

### **The Dreyfus Affair:**

In France in 1894 military intelligence discovered that there was a spy in military headquarters. Since they did not know who the spy was, they decided to blame the only Jew in the office, Captain Alfred Dreyfus. In a rigged trial Dreyfus was charged, found guilty, and sentenced to a long term on Devil's Island. Though he was later released, the trial frightened French Jews, who had previously felt safe in France.

### **Anti-Semitism:**

In Germany and elsewhere in the late 1800s there was a new anti-Jewish doctrine called anti-Semitism. It was different from other forms of anti-Semitism in the past in that it claimed to be "scientific." It declared Jews to be a separate racial group, felt that "all people are governed by racial law," and said that any mixing (either socially or by marriage) was corrupting. By 1879 there was a German Anti-Semitic League that called for discriminatory laws against Jews.

### **The Holocaust:**

The Nazis ruled Germany from 1933-45 and from the beginning persecuted Jews. Starting in 1941 they began a systematic plan to kill all Jews. (They also turned on other groups, such as gypsies, homosexuals, and communists, who did not fit their doctrine of racial and social purity.) This was called the Holocaust. In those years, a third of all the world's Jews were killed, 67% of those in Europe, and over 85% of those in Poland and other areas directly controlled by the Nazis. Such a systematic, cold-blooded effort to exterminate a whole people is called a genocide.

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## **TYPES OF ZIONISM**

Zionism has been interpreted by Jews, inside and outside of Israel, in a variety of ways. Below are five. These views are represented in organizations and political parties in Israel.

### **Refugee Zionism**

Throughout modern history Jews have been assaulted or expelled from their homes. Many people (including many non-Jews) think there is something unique about the Jewish historical experience that made them vulnerable to attack. Certainly we can point to cases where Jews were secure for generations on end, and to times when Jews and non-Jews banded together to prevent anti-Jewish actions. But the fact that Jews went 1900 years without a geographic homeland or self-government or army seemed to

contribute to their vulnerability. Many persons have made a simple argument: when Jews are attacked, they should have a place to go to be safe. Hence there should be a Jewish state. In this sense, most Jews are Zionist.

## **Socialist or Labor Zionism**

Many early Zionists were socialists. Particularly in Russia, they wanted to go to Palestine to create a just socialist society which would be an example to the world. They wanted to create a "working" community of farmers and laborers that would live peacefully with Palestinians. They were particularly interested in farming since in Europe few Jews were farmers. Their descendants are today associated with the Labor Party, the trade unions, and the cooperative farms (called Kibbutzim.) Many support negotiations with Palestinians.

## **Religious Zionism**

Religious Jews are divided among themselves about the nature and purpose of Israel. For a long time, many were hostile to political Zionism for they saw early leaders as non-religious individuals with no real commitment to Judaism. Even today, several thousand devoutly religious Jews still oppose the very existence of Israel as a "blasphemy" against God. Most religious Jews, however, do not feel this way. Most participate fully in politics. Overall about a third of all Israelis are religious in an Orthodox sense; about 15% vote for various religious parties.

## **Ethical Zionism**

Many Jewish teachings emphasize concepts of justice. Early in this century Jewish leader Ahad Ha'am taught that Jews should go to Palestine and live in small communities where they would preserve the values of Judaism and serve as an example to others. He said, "I am more concerned about Judaism than about Jews." In the 1940's liberal Jews of this tradition opposed a Jewish state and preferred a "bi-national state" of Jews and Palestinians federated together. The famous teacher Martin Buber and many of his intellectual colleagues held these views.

## **Revisionist Zionism**

In the 1930s some militant Jews formed military organizations and set out to create a Jewish state by force. The founder of this movement was a highly intelligent, charismatic figure, Vladimir Jabotinsky, who argued against dependence on the British and other international powers to produce a Jewish state; he also argued for the use of armed force against any opponents of Jewish nationalism, including against Arabs. Two of his most ardent followers were Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, both of whom became Prime Ministers and leaders of the Likud party.

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# **THEODOR HERZL**

The most famous Zionist thinker was Theodor Herzl. He is considered the founding father of modern political Zionism. He was born in 1860 in Budapest and grew up in the sophisticated atmosphere of Vienna. He was not religious. His concern was with Jewish security, the fact that Jews were under attack. In 1896 he wrote a book called *The Jewish State* beginning with a famous phrase: "The idea which I have developed in this pamphlet is a very old one: it is the restoration of the Jewish state."

Herzl began his analysis with an assumption: debates about whether there should be a Jewish state must be put aside. Reality speaks for itself:

"No one can deny the gravity of the Jewish situation. Whenever they live in appreciable numbers, Jews are persecuted in greater or lesser measure."

"The decisive factor is our propelling force. And what is that force? The Plight of the Jews."

Herzl asks why these attacks are happening. Jews are attacked whether they are rich or poor, whether they are sophisticated or backward, whether they are educated or illiterate. His conclusion: the cause of tension is not that the Jews have a different religion, or that they hold certain jobs, or that they may wear different kinds of clothes. Tension arises from the fact that Jews are a nation of people living in someone else's country. They cannot be assimilated. The solution is national: Jews must separate and create a state of their own.

"I consider the Jewish question neither a social nor a religious one...It is a national question...We are a people--one people."

Herzl had a strategy for creating a Jewish state. Since those who hate the Jews will be most in favor of creating a Jewish state, he met with anti-Jewish officials in Russia to try to win support for his plan. Herzl said he was not appealing to sympathy or good will but to self-interest. If removing Jews would reduce social tensions (as some European leaders believed), what leader would oppose such a scheme? Herzl felt that in the end the rulers of Europe would support Jewish nationalism even if they did not like Jews.

"I do not aim to arouse sympathy for our course."

"The world needs the Jewish state; therefore it will arise."

Herzl's solution was to create a Jewish state somewhere in the world. He was open as to where the state would be. He considered Argentina, Sinai, and Kenya. Later he settled on Jerusalem to win political support among rabbis and others.

"Let sovereignty be granted us over a portion of the globe adequate to meet our national requirements, we will attend to the rest."

"Argentina is one of the most fertile countries in the world, extends over a vast area, is sparsely populated, and has a temperate climate. It would be in its own highest interest for the Republic of Argentina to cede us a portion of its territory."

"Palestine is our unforgettable historic homeland. The very name would be a marvelously effective rallying cry."

Herzl felt that the creation of a Jewish state would draw poor Jews from Europe, lead to their revival as healthy, functioning human beings, and produce an immediate drop in anti-Semitism. With a Jewish state in existence, Jews elsewhere would be more likely to live in peace.

"The poorest will go first and cultivate the soil."

"The exodus will thus at the same time be an ascent in class."

"Once we begin to execute the plan, anti-Semitism will cease at once and everywhere."

Herzl emphasized the benefits that would flow to the Ottoman Empire, which controlled Palestine. This weak regime ("The Sick Man of Europe") was bankrupt and badly managed. Herzl met with Ottoman officials and hinted that he could arrange Jewish loans to help refinance the enormous Ottoman debt. He also suggested that Jews would make excellent administrators who could bring order to the chaotic Ottoman administration. Jewish capital would flow into the region, benefiting all.

"We could offer the present authorities enormous advantages, assume part of the public debt, build new thoroughfares, which we ourselves would also require, and do many other things. The very creation of the Jewish State would be beneficial to neighboring lands, since the cultivation of a strip of land increases the values of its surrounding districts."

To the European powers Herzl emphasized the strategic benefits of supporting a Jewish state in the midst of the Arab world. Since Britain was aligned with Turkey, benefits could come to both Britain and Turkey. Since the Jewish state would be dependent upon the West, it would be a reliable ally.

"If His Majesty the Sultan were to give us Palestine, we could in return undertake the complete management of the finances of Turkey. We should there form a part of a wall of defense for Europe in Asia, an outpost of civilization against barbarism. We should as a neutral state remain in contact with all Europe, which would have to guarantee our existence."

Herzl believed that Palestinians would welcome a Jewish state because of the benefits that would flow to them. He also felt that most Arabs were migrants without any ties to the land and could easily move to another place without great loss. In his diary he spoke casually of "spiriting" Arabs across the border. In his novel *The New Land* about the future Jewish state, a European visitor is skeptical about the treatment of Palestinian Arabs. Herzl has a Muslim Palestinian explain how the new state operates and how he and his Jewish friends live together in their common homeland.

"Would you call a man a robber who takes nothing from you but brings you something instead? The Jews have enriched us, why should we be angry with them? They dwell among us like brothers. Why should we not love them? I have never had a better friend among my co-religionists than my friend David Littwak here...He prays in a different house to the God who is above us all. But our houses of worship stand side by side, and I always believe that our prayers, when they rise, mingle somewhere up above, and then continue on their way together until they appear before Our Father."

Herzl created organizations to implement his plans: a bank, a land-purchase organization (Jewish National Fund), and a political organization to link Jews together (World Zionist Organization). These still exist today.

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## QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES FOR LESSON TWO

1. Define these words and explain why they are important: anti-Semitism, Dreyfus Affair, Holocaust, kibbutz, Kishinev massacre, migration, Pale, pogrom, shtetl.
2. Who are the following and why are they important for understanding Zionism: Martin Buber,

Menachem Begin, Captain Dreyfus, Ahad Ha'am, Theodor Herzl, Vladimir Jabotinsky. Can you put them in chronological order?

3. On a contemporary atlas can you find where the Pale was? What countries are there today? Have you seen any movies that depict Jewish life in the Pale? Fiddler on the Roof is a famous (sad but funny) one that is available on video.
  4.
    - a. Write a dialogue between Zionists of two or more different types on the meaning of Zionism. On what would they agree or disagree?
    - b. Organize study teams to represent the various Jewish groups. Have discussions among yourselves about whether there should be a Jewish state, and how it should be organized.
  5. Imagine you are a Palestinian who wants to live in peace with Jews. How would you react to Herzl's proposal?
  6. Thought Question: When attacks began on Jews in Eastern Europe a hundred years ago, some Jews just stayed out of politics, some fought to change their country through revolution, and some left. Can you make any guesses about the types of Jews who became revolutionaries versus those who left, and those who just tried to stay out of the way? What do you think you would have done?
  7. Thought Question: We saw that there were different kinds of Zionists. After reading Theodore Herzl, how would you classify him? What differences of opinion would he have had with other Jews? Herzl is considered the founding Father of Jewish Nationalism. He was from Austria where the life of Jews was not as difficult as in Russia. What explanation can you offer as to why modern Austria, rather than backward Russia, was the home of the founding father of Zionism?
  8. Discussion Question: Below are profiles of six Israeli families, all based on real cases. Which do you think would support which kind of Zionism, and why?
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## **Real People Face Real Problems**

Mr. Abu Hatzera moved to Israel from Egypt in 1967, the year Israel defeated Egypt in war. Many Egyptian Jews left that year, out of fear or because they were pressured to go. He runs a small tool and die shop in the suburbs. When he and his wife were visiting the Old City last year, they were attacked by a Palestinian man who stabbed him in the arm with a knife.

Mr. Aaron's parents were from Germany. They were strong believers in the equality of all people, and felt that Jews had an obligation to seek a just settlement with the Palestinians. Mr. Aaron's father was a soldier who died in the 1973 war.

Mr. Barak is from Poland. He was a boy of 12 when World War II ended. He had spent nearly a year in a concentration camp. Both of his parents were killed, as was his sister. He lives in Tel Aviv. The only Palestinians he ever sees are workers.

Mrs. Cohen lives in a small town near the Syrian border. She and her husband own a shop. In 1984 her soldier son was killed in Lebanon. Of her two remaining sons, one is in the army and the other is an anti-

war protester who has been arrested twice.

Yair is 19. He lives in a Jewish settlement near Nablus. He has lived there since he was 7. He is now in the military and has been assigned for three months to the Gaza Strip where his unit has almost daily confrontations with Palestinian demonstrators. Last week his mother called and said as the family was driving home from Jerusalem a rock was thrown through their windshield and his younger brother had to have 12 stitches in his face.

Mr. David is an engineer who moved to America seven years ago. He says he left Israel because life there was too hard: his taxes were very high, he had to spend several days a month on military reserve duty, and people spent all their time arguing about the Arabs. He likes America very much and says there is no future for him in Israel.

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Go on to [Lesson 3](#).

Go back to [Lesson 1](#).

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