

"FROM TIME IMMEMORIAL"--WHOSE LAND IS IT?

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Short years ago, the very existence of Israel was threatened by sudden and repeated invasions from hostile Arab nations. Israel now seems to have secured its border from all but fanatical terrorists. Now the tiny nation faces other problems; what to do with over 100% inflation, what to do with its super-orthodox and militant religionists, what to do with super-nationalists, what to do with a part of its army mired in Lebanon. These are indeed grievous problems which the new unity government is hoping to solve. For American Jews, however, there is a different kind of problem with respect to Israel, which we have to solve, and it is that special problem for us that I would like to discuss this morning.

Israeli Jews do not worry about Arab charges that the Jews marched into Palestine and stole away a land which the Arabs have claimed "from time immemorial". When you come to a sparsely settled land filled with swamps, disease laden, and poverty stricken and you build it up into a fertile garden by the sweat of your brow, you do not worry about such charges. American Jews, on the other hand, have to listen to constant charges at the United Nations which is close at hand. We listen to Arab voices encouraged to speak out on international T.V. We hear the protestations of certain American friends of the Arabs like Jesse Jackson, and sometimes deep down in our conscience, we worry about whether the Jewish claim to the land is as clear as our Israeli compatriots say it is.

It is now possible to get a more definitive answer to this question by means of a book written by one Joan Peters which is called "From Time Immemorial". Ms. Peters, who has written and lectured widely on foreign affairs, began a study on the question of the claims of the Palestinian Arabs because she believed that the Arabs were being short-changed. She made a thorough study of all available historical records, including Arabs records, and she studied in detail the vast records of the British government which was appointed by the League of Nations after World War One to be the mandate power over Palestine. In the process of this scholarly study, Ms. Peters progressively became aware that the Arabs were engaged in a propaganda war based on a unhistorical premise. Her book is filled with statistics and papers from dozens of sources. Ms. Peters, a non-Jew, concludes that the Arabs have not been in Palestine as they claim, from time immemorial and that, on the contrary, the Jews have a singular right to claim modern Israel.

I'm going to take just a few minutes of our precious time this morning to pass on to you some of this important information, but I want you to read the book and place it carefully on your library shelf. During the recent Lebanese invasion when Israel hoped to cripple the base of PLO power, the media as you know repeatedly showed Arafat kissing babies and otherwise gave Arabs every opportunity to demonstrate the villainous nature of the Israelis and the righteousness of the Arab cause. I remember hearing at that time on radio, a so-called Palestinian scholar who went so far as to claim that the Arabs were the original inhabitants of the land of Canaan when Moses first brought the Israelites there. This is, of course, the sheerest falsehood. The Canaanites were a Mediterranean people who came to the land from the North and West. The Arabs are people from the Arabian peninsula to the South and East. Responsible Arab historians, like Hitti, formerly of Princeton University, make it very clear that the Arabs did not come to Palestine until the 7th century of this era or a mere 1,350 years ago, and they came then as conquerors who did not settle in the land in significant numbers.

The Israelites under Moses entered Canaan about 1200 BCE or 1,900 years before the Arab invasion, and we go back to Abraham, we must add another 500 years to the Israeli's claim. If fact, the Torah clearly tells us that Abraham purchased land in the City of Hebron from the Hittites, note not from the Arabs. We thus have a written record of an Israelite land purchase in the Holy Land almost 4,000 years ago.



Now, when the Arabs swept out of the Arabian peninsula into much of the Middle East as conquerors after the prophet Mohammed had aroused them, they found non-Arab peoples in most of the countries which today are called Arab. In the 7th century of this era, the time of the Arab invasion, Iraq and Iran were under Persian or Kurdish influence while Syria and Egypt were Byzantine or Greek-Christian, a remnant of the Eastern Roman Empire. In all of these countries, especially in Iraq, Egypt, and Palestine, there were large numbers of Jews. The Jews had been in Iraq, formerly Babylonia, since the time of the Babylonian conquest of Judea. You will recall that in 586 BCE, the Babylonians had taken captive a large number of the upper classes of Judea and transported them to Babylonia, while a somewhat lesser but still significant number of Jews had gone to Egypt with the prophet Jeremiah at about that same time. We know from the records of the Arab General who invaded Egypt in 641-2, that he found there in Alexandria, "forty thousand tax paying Jews" (see P. Hitti, "The Arabs, A Short Story", Princeton, University Press, 1943, P. 164). So we might say that the Arabs took Egypt away from Jews, though it would be more accurate to say that they took it away from the Christians who were the dominant group. In Iraq, where an even larger number of Jews dwelled, the dominant forces were, as we have noted, of Persian or Kurdish descent.

At this time in history, Palestine was even less developed than other countries in the Near East. The Romans had devastated the Jewish community after the Bar Kochba Revolt in the year 135 CE, and with the progressive decline of the Romans, no major developments took place in the Holy Land. To be sure, Jews continued to live in their land, although the Romans had barred them from Jerusalem. From time to time, Jews rose up to revolt against their Byzantine Rulers, and in 614 CE the Jews helped the Persians conquer Palestine. Twenty years later, Arab armies swarmed in for the first time, but the Arabs did not populate the land. The Arabs used Palestine as they used most of the other counties they conquered, merely as a base for tribute, and certainly no independent nation was established there. In 750, a government centered in Baghdad captured Palestine.

In a little more than one hundred years, a Turkish General, who was Governor of Egypt, conquered Palestine (878). Baghdad was back in power shortly thereafter (904). This push and pull between the governments of Egypt, Baghdad, and the Turks went on for centuries. Palestine was but a small prize, a pawn, in the power struggle between these different groups, neither of which established a clear culture or civilization in Palestine. During all of this time, the Jews were very much present. In 1099, this phase of the history of the Holy Land came to an abrupt halt when the crusaders conquered Jerusalem and killed virtually all of the Muslim inhabitants of Jerusalem, as well as many Jews.

In 1260, the Mongols invaded Palestine and sacked Jerusalem. In 1516, the Ottomans or Turks conquered Palestine. Even Napoleon had his hand in Palestine in 1799, offering great rewards to the Jews if they would join his forces.

From the time the Arabs first invaded, until the 20th century, there never was anything resembling a Palestinian Arab nation. Indeed, as Ms. Peters demonstrates from historical records, Palestine was an exceedingly barren and weak land, claimed over the centuries by many different kinds of groups on the one hand and peopled by a diverse and unusually poor populace with little loyalty to the land. During this period, Palestine was a vassal land paying tribute to whomsoever had conquered it most recently.

An Arab writer, (Sharif Hussein, Al-Qibla, Mecca, March 23, 1918) writes of the essentially transient Muslim population as late as 1918. Sherif Hussein wrote, "The resources of the century are still virgin soil and will be developed by the Jewish immigrants. One of the most amazing things until recent times was that the Palentinian used to leave his country, wandering over the high seas in every direction. His native soil could not retain its hold on him..." The Encyclopedia Brittanica, 1911 edition, which appeared before the Arabs started their propaganda about a Palestinian nation, states, "The community is a heterogeneous one with fifty languages being spoken".



Mark Twain visited the Holy Land in 1867 and registered gloom on his findings. Twain wrote, "Stirring scenes...occur in the valley (Jezreel) no more. There is not a solitary village throughout its whole extent..". Twain writes of the "unpeopled deserts of Galilee, the melancholy ruin of Capernaum, the stupid village of Tiberias". Going through these areas which the Israelis have now transformed into prosperous and teeming areas, Twain wrote a century ago, "We never saw a human being on the whole route". "Nazareth", he wrote, "is forlorn...Jericho is accursed...Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes... desolate and unlovely" (From Time Immemorial, P. 159060).

Clarence Darrow, who visited Palestine in the 1920's , wrote "It is a land of sand and stones and the stones are there to keep the sand from blowing away".

The modern history of Palestine begins in the late 19th century when the Jews began to colonize the land intensely once again. Ms. Peters demonstrates that for the first time a larger Arab population began to come to Palestine on the heels of the Jews. As the Jews drained the swamps and caused the land to be able to support more people, the Arabs came in from many different countries. Ms. Peters makes it clear that these were immigrant Arabs. They were not Arabs who had inhabited the land "from time immemorial". They were new immigrants taking advantage of a better economic climate created by Jews.

Ms. Peters also develops for us the manner in which the British, who were mandated by the League of Nations to help Jews immigrate to Palestine, violated that mandate. Had Britain been true to her trust, Ms. Peters concludes, many more Jews would have been able to settle in Palestine, and Hitler would have killed a great many less Jews. Instead, Ms. Peters demonstrates, the British permitted foreign Arabs to immigrate illegally into those very areas which the League of Nations had set aside for the Jews. In 1923, Great Britain assigned 75% of Palestine to be an Arab Palestinian state. It is called Transjordan, meaning on the other side, or the east side of the Jordan. Now only 25% of the original mandate was open to Jews, but the British forcefully limited Jewish immigration in even this small area of Palestine, while at the same time ignoring a continuing large scale Arab immigration. One cannot read Ms. Peter's voluminous record without becoming convinced that the vast majority of Arabs who were in Palestine by the time the United Nations recognized a Jewish state in 1948 were relative newcomers.

I am not going to take the time this morning to delineate in detail the statistics that Ms. Peters has assembled for us. Get the book "From Time Immemorial" and study it. Note I did not say read it. It is not a novel. I recommend the study of this book.

Now that we American Jews can rest easy about the fact that the Jews have not displaced a long standing Arab nation in Palestine, I want to turn our attention to a critical problem in modern Israel which ought to command our interest. I am talking about the attempt by a few super-nationalist Israelis to displace Arabs entirely. Palestinian Arabs do not have the right to oppose a Jewish national home in Israel. They do have the right to live in areas, like the West Bank, which they have occupied for some time, and those who would drive them out of these areas are acting in a crude and objectionable manner. I speak, of course, of Rabbi Meir Kahane and those tiny but extremely vocal groups, like the Gush Emunim, which claim that since Judea and Samaria belonged to Israel in biblical times, no other people has the right in modern times to dwell there. This is as much poppy-cock as the Arab propaganda that Jews have to give Tel Aviv back to the Arabs who never lived there.

Israel wisely fears another Arab Palestinian state. If the Palestinian Arabs west of the Jordan, become an independent state, they will have the right to an army, to an air force, and to Soviet rockets. If the Arabs in Hebron, and perhaps Gaza, have Soviet rockets, no Israeli plane could take off from Ben Gurion Airport in safety. Palestinian Arabs already have one state in Transjordan. It is much larger than tiny Israel. Transjordan has its army. It has attacked Israel not once but on many occasions. Each time it has been beaten back. At one time, after the 1984 War, Jordan controlled the West Back plus much of



Jerusalem itself. Jordan has demonstrated quite clearly that where foreign policy is concerned, it will act as all the Arab states do. It will march with its Arab colleagues against Israel at a ram's bleating.

If Israel is wise, it will not permit another Arab army West of the Jordan. But on the other hand, Israel has with justice, to give the Arabs of Hebron and Nablus, the two major Arab cities in the West Bank, a fair measure of self government. At one time, Israel was quite willing to do this, but the Arabs of these cities kept allying themselves with foreign Arabs who claimed they would push Israel into the sea. The leaders of these cities have shown a definite proclivity towards the PLO, that most militant of Arab organizations, which is sworn to the destruction of Israel. Some kind of independence for local self government, but no army this is the same pattern for Israel with respect to these Arab enclaves.

It must be noted, that the West Bank Arabs have shown no willingness to accept this kind of compromise, but it makes sense for Israel to pursue it. In exchange for self government, it is assumed that the Arabs in these cities will give up their warlike ways and come to a peaceful acceptance of the State of Israel.

The danger in the situation is compounded by the fact that some right wing Israelis think that the West Bank should summarily be annexed to Israel. If this is done, however, Israel will be faced with an enormous dilemma. With annexation goes the problem of citizenship. If the West Bank Arabs are granted the right to vote, there will be as many Arab votes in Israel as Jewish votes, and this could well mean the end of a distinctively Jewish State. On the other hand, if the annexed Arabs of the West Bank were denied the right to vote, Israel would be guilty of ethnic discrimination. On the moral level, this would be disastrous.

To avoid this dilemma, since neither of these solutions is an adequate one, it seems best that Israel not annex the West Bank. It is possible to grant the West Bank Arabs a large measure of self government without granting the right to form still another Arab army aimed at the very heart of the Jewish nation. Another viable alternative is that the West Bank Arabs become citizens of Jordan. In the months and year ahead of us you will be hearing more about the problems in the West Bank. I believe that Shimon Peres and those who voted for him would favor the kind of solution which I have outlined. Whether Peres has the power to affect such a solution has yet to be seen.

That minority of Israelis who favor a radical solution to the Arab problem in the West Bank are also those who would deny Reform and Conservative Rabbis official status in Israel. These are the same people who are trying to amend the Law of Return. There is a way that you and I as Reform Jews can hope to counter the influence of these people. First of all, of course, we could go to Israel to live and enter the political process. Failing that, we can join ARZA, the American Reform Zionist Association. You can do that very easily by signing the form in our activity brochure and mailing it to our office. You will be billed for the grand total of fifteen dollars. The more members we have in Arza the greater influence we Reform Jews have in the Zionist organization of America, and the more influence we have with respect to the Jewish Agency. The Jewish Agency is that body which mediates the relationship between the Israeli government and Jews outside of Israel. At one time half of our Beth Am members were members of ARZA. I would like to see that figure rise to, 100%. Please do not depreciate the importance of your joining ARZA.

We should all hope that the unity government in Israel succeeds, for if it does, the super Orthodox religious parties in Israel will have less power. These parties get only a small percentage of the national vote, but because no single party has a majority of the votes, the religious parties are courted fervently, and often they are given a disproportionate influence in the government. Many of those who are in the most Orthodox group do not even fight in the Israeli Army. Still, their voice is often heard above every other



voice demanding concessions.

We Reform Jews can help Israel in many ways. We can give to the UJA in large amounts. We can buy bonds. And we can join ARZA. We can visit Israel. There is no question about the need for a Jewish state in a world still riddled with anti-semitism. There is no question about the righteousness of the Israeli cause vis-a-vis the Palestinian Arab claim that the Jews have no right to be there, but non-Jews are not the only humans who can be meshuganahs. Now that they have come to power in Israel, some few Jews are proving dramatically that they can be as dumb or as cruel, in some cases, as non-Jews. All right, we have to let Jews make the kind of mistakes that other humans make and still love them, and we will continue to give of our money of which we have an abundance and which they desperately need; but we will also begin to raise our voice against excesses where we see them committed. Jews have the right to be meshugah, but they don't have to be meshuganahs. They can still set an example in human behavior for others, as they have done with amazing frequency since biblical times.

At your seats are envelopes containing an Israeli bond form. All you have to do to buy a bond is to turn down a tab and write your name and address. Members of the Beth Am Youth Group will be waiting outside the door as you leave the Sanctuary. Put your signed form in the box which they will make available to you. Or, if you prefer, take the form home and mail it in to the suggested address today. We are hoping that you will fill the box with your pledge cards. The tally of bonds sold by each Miami congregation will be printed in the local newspaper.

I am sure that you want to something to help Israel. It is possible for you to be more than just a spectator to dramatic events going on there. Take advantage of this opportunity.