



Countering the BDS Colonial Settler Narrative

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ABOUT AEN

The Academic Engagement Network (AEN) is an organization of faculty members, administrators, and staff members on American college and university campuses across the United States. We are committed to opposing the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, affirming academic freedom and freedom of expression in the university community, and promoting robust discussion of Israel on campus.

The AEN aims to promote more productive ways of addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In place of one-sided sloganeering reinforcing simple binaries, we advocate open debate acknowledging complexity. In place of aggressive, antidemocratic tactics galvanizing deep inter-group suspicions, we advocate respectful exchanges of ideas. We insist that the heckler's veto has no place in the academy – there is no free speech right that permits blocking free speech by others. We are committed as well to addressing antisemitism often found in BDS and anti-Israel narratives.

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The Academic Engagement Network (AEN) pamphlet series is an occasional series that addresses the primary concerns of the organization: championing academic freedom on American college and university campuses, opposing the BDS movement, encouraging a robust and sophisticated discussion of topics related to Israel and the Middle East, and combating antisemitism. Authors include AEN members and other noted scholars and thinkers who contribute to the discourse on these subjects. Certain pamphlets may also be accompanied by discussions with the author in the form of recordings or podcasts.

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This pamphlet represents the keynote presentation of Ilan Troen, the Stoll Professor of Israel Studies, emeritus (Brandeis University), and the Lopin Professor of Modern History, emeritus (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev), at the second annual conference of the Academic Engagement Network in Chicago, May 2017. He was director of the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies (Brandeis) and the Ben-Gurion Research Institute for the Study of Israel and Zionism (Sde Boker, Israel). He is immediate past president of the Association for Israel Studies

It's particularly gratifying to be in Chicago; it was a very important stepping stone in my life, and it's related to this conference.

The first time I ever spoke publicly on behalf of Israel was in Chicago. In the early 1960s, I was a new graduate student at the University of Chicago, and I naturally gravitated toward friendship with some Israelis; even then, I knew that I wanted to make *aliyah* [immigrate to Israel]. When the issue of Israel came up on campus in a negative way, I was a natural candidate to counter such accusations. Even though my American accent may suffer from having been born on the other side of the Hudson River, I nevertheless had a better accent than my Israeli

colleagues, so I was the “plant.”

Those meetings were interesting; I would go from campus to campus and address the issues, whether it was water, or the conflict near the Golan Heights, or any other subject; I knew what questions to ask, and I could infiltrate the meeting with my American accent and somehow insinuate an alternative view.

The underlying theme at those meetings was not the legitimacy of the State of Israel, and it was not about anti-Semitism. Most people to whom I spoke understood that Israel was here to stay, and that it wasn't a malevolent country; it was merely wrong on a particular issue: its relationship with the Arabs. The rhetoric may have been excessively aggressive, but the kind of anti-Israel rhetoric and actions that afflict us today were simply not on the map.

Additionally, the Jewish community was entirely supportive. Rabbis were not embarrassed to talk about Israel in their congregations. I met my wife while I was a director at a summer camp for Hebrew-speakers run by the Chicago Board of Jewish Education. We called our bunks by Israeli place-names, like Degania and Eilat. Nobody was embarrassed by Israel within the Jewish community, and nobody was concerned about its legitimacy in the family of nations. How different that is today.

There is an important anniversary on November 2nd of this year: the 100th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration. I'd like you to think about what that means. You should know that even though the Balfour Declaration is something to be celebrated, for many in the world today, it is the instance of original sin. For many, the Arab-Israeli conflict begins with the Balfour Declaration.

What the Balfour Declaration claimed is something which is under the most serious challenge today. It is a short letter given to Lord Rothschild by the British government: “His Majesty's government view with favor the establishing of Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this

object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities.”

Please note that the word “people” is an important word in this context, and we’re going to come back to it. Note also that the Declaration lists not Palestinians, nor Arabs, but “non-Jewish communities” in Palestine; it also mentions the rights of political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country, which of course means all of us in the United States, London, or anywhere else in the Diaspora.

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This is a fantastic document because it was not only accepted by President Woodrow Wilson and British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour; it was also ratified by the French, the Italians, the Japanese, and many other nations in the world almost immediately. This becomes in 1922 the foundational document for the British Mandate for Palestine granted by the League of Nations. The Balfour Declaration said something absolutely astounding, and what it said then is precisely what we must defend today.

The League of Nations Mandate said that the Jews were now entitled to reconstitute themselves in Palestine. Think about what “reconstitute” means. The most important part, for our purposes, is those two little letters: r-e (re or “again”). Those two little letters were the acknowledgement that the Jews of the twentieth century (and, we might add, our own) have a connection with what has over the ages transpired in that country, which they called Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel).

If you will, the word “reconstitute” is a rejection of replacement theology. It’s a rejection of supersessionism, and the people who could sanction such things were people like Arthur James Balfour, who was a particular kind of Protestant, an Evangelical, who, in the nineteenth-

century language of Christianity, believed in the restoration of the Jews. What a huge idea that is.

What I want you to appreciate is that the Balfour Declaration was a fortunate moment in Jewish history (and, hopefully, not merely a fleeting moment). After all, to be recognized as a people in the early twentieth century in Wilson's America was important; in his Fourteen Points

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speech he spoke about national rights. These were not individual rights, and they were not human rights: they were the rights of peoples. At that time, peoples were understood to be the basic and essential element necessary to constitute or create political communities.

That understanding ended, or began to end, in 1948, one year and a month after the United Nations voted for the partition of Palestine and the creation of a Jewish and an Arab state. It was then that the United Nations decided on the Declaration of Human Rights: not a treaty, but a declaration, since there was no unanimity. Nevertheless, human rights seemed to subsume or to supersede national rights. This ended that peculiar moment in the history of the world,

particularly the West, when we privileged the creation of states with peoples, waged wars of national liberation, and supported national liberation movements. The First World War was official recognition of that era for the peoples of Europe and elsewhere, but that came to an end after World War II, when another kind of polity was privileged.

I don't know if the recognition of the Jewish people and their entitlement to a state could be accomplished today; I rather doubt it. In short, there was an extraordinary window of opportunity that was given to the Jewish people beginning with the First World War through the aftermath of the Second World War. But there are some elements of that recognition that must be made permanent, and among the most

important is the issue of the recognition of the Jews as a people that are entitled to live in their own polity in a part of the world in which they have a deep connection and are not mere interlopers.

This has a great deal to do with what settler colonialism is because settler colonialism is about foreigners coming to a land outside of Europe to usurp the rights and place of the natives, often to engage in exploitation, at one extreme, and, at the other extreme, to engage in ethnic cleansing. All of those terms are being used to describe what the Jewish experience has been in Palestine and Israel in the twentieth century. Scholars of settler colonialism, like Patrick Wolfe, consider Zionism to be a system or structure imbued with an internal logic of displacing an indigenous people.

Before I go on, I just want to say that I understand why the first session of this meeting emphasized the tactics and methodologies of counteracting BDS on the campuses. But the battle against BDS is not merely to be won at the annual meetings of academic organizations or in response to boycott and divestment campaigns on campuses. What we really need to do is to engage in enhancing literacy; this is the central issue. You can confront a whole list of topics – human rights, who’s responsible for the various wars, why there isn’t peace, why Israelis behave poorly towards the Palestinians despite having endured the Holocaust – but ultimately the original topic, the most fundamental topic is the right of the Jews to claim a natural place in the Land of Israel.

Let’s talk a bit about peoplehood and about Israel’s Declaration of Independence and how it is different than the American Declaration of Independence.

The American Declaration of Independence does not deal with a people. Edward Morgan, a Yale historian, wrote some years ago that in the American case, the nation was the child of the revolution, not the father. In short, there was no American people until much later. The American Declaration of Independence is about the pursuit of

individual happiness and it's about property. It is not about the rights of a people.

Most of the declarations of the twentieth century are about the rights of peoples. Again, to be considered a people is absolutely crucial, and when you read the Israeli Declaration of Independence, its inclusion is not accidental. The Declaration lists a variety of issues that we'll talk about a bit later, particularly how peoples may claim legitimate rights to territory, and it begins with history. Specifically, it begins with the historic connection of the Jewish people to the Land

of Israel: it talks about the Bible, it talks about their actual presence, it talks about coming to the land and making the desert bloom, it talks about being on the side of the victor (that is to say a kind of conquest), it talks about purchase of land, it talks about international

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recognition or treaties. And if you finally exhaust all of those rights, it then imitates the American Declaration of Independence by claiming that our rights are self-evident. In short, if nothing else works you just say it's true because it happens to be true.

This kind of understanding, this ability to frame oneself in this way, as the Jews did, was really an imitation of the way in which twentieth century political discourse took place. There was nothing exceptional between the Balfour Declaration and the creation of the State of Israel. But something has happened between then and the present. The BDS movement speaks to that more recent process.

The story actually begins in 1955, when Israel was not admitted into the Afro-Asian (or Bandung) Conference, in which non-aligned nations

expressed their opposition to colonialism. In 1975, it continued with United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3379, which says Zionism is a form of racism, and it also includes the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa in 2001, when anti-Jewish rhetoric and anti-Israel political agendas caused Israel and the US to withdraw from the conference. In short, the BDS movement that we confront today didn't come out of nowhere. It came out of a long gestation that was sponsored initially by non-aligned nations, Muslim nations, and their "Third World" allies that were in many ways oriented towards the Soviet Union.

Indeed, the very term "colonial settler" enters into the academic lexicon in 1966 with *Colonial Empires*, a book by British historian D.K. Fieldhouse on comparative colonialism. What's fascinating about his book is that nowhere does Fieldhouse mention Zionism. Nowhere does he mention Palestine and the Jews. The book focuses on the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, the English, the French, and so on; in short, it is a book about European colonialism and European imperialism, and the Jews are absent from it because Fieldhouse in 1966 did not recognize Israel as part of a European movement. He would change his mind in the 1990s in a particular way, but in 1966, the phrase enters into the lexicon – without mentioning Jews or Israel.

But in 1967, Max Rodinson, a French Jew who studied and converted to Islam through a Communist lens, wrote about Israel as a colonial-settler state. It did not take long for that phrase to gain currency. By the mid-1970s, you would not have had the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3379 without the notion of Israel as a colonial settler state somehow resonating with a significant part of the international community. This was not influenced by the 1967 war and the capture of territories. There were very few settlements in 1975, and all those settlements were in places where Jews had lived before the 1948 War, such as Hebron, Gush Etzion, and one or two other outposts. These weren't the same as the settlements that were built after 1977.

There's a change of perception that comes from the left, and it is done with an alliance to the Muslim world, which was not able to and would not accept the presence of a Jewish state. This notion of settler-colonialism is not necessarily inherent or basic, it's one of the many indications that I could cite for you where Arab and, particularly now, Palestinian opponents of Israel adopt the political language of the twentieth century in order to advance their case, whether or not it applies.

However, in comparing Israel with France and Spain and others on the subject of settler-colonialism, there is a measure of truth to the comparison in the ways in which Israel conducted itself and Zionists conducted themselves. But the fact that there are points of comparison that are legitimate, interesting or valuable can then be used to taint the whole. Still, Israel is not the last European-influenced country or culture to engage in settlement, in colonialism. Indeed: is Zionism colonialism?

There are a number of useful pieces in the literature of the anti-settler colonial movements: Yoav Gelber, Johannes Becke, Derek Penslar, myself, and several others lay out the case in an academic way that the analogy simply does not work: it's a stretch, a distortion.

The facts are that the original notion of settler colonialism, not only by Frederickson, but by Rodinson and others, was actually an economic analysis, an extension of Hobson and Lenin's books on imperialism and colonialism, adapted to the present. It fits nicely with Marxism because the analysis is that what motivates people are material interests. However, the fact is that Zionism never paid; it was, to use the words of Baruch Kimmerling, economically irrational.

Some documents that I came across from the 1930s recorded that the Zionist authorities assumed it would be at least 25 years before they ever got a return for their investment in any kibbutz they ever established. There was no mother country or father country hoping to reap the profit from the money that came from Europe to the "colony," as it were; it didn't go back from the colony to Europe. The work was done

by the colonists themselves rather than exploiting local labor. In this case, Zionism gets attacked both ways: if they had built plantations and exploited labor or even hired labor, they would have been culpable. But in settler colonial ideology, the fact that they did the work themselves also makes them culpable because somehow this made for segregationists or, as the current phrase goes: “apartheid.”

The distortion is absolutely astounding. Where in the Middle East in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when Zionism was developing was there an integrated society? For that matter, where in the United States of America was there an integrated society? The assumption appears to be that there was a putative imaginary democratic place where all individuals were citizens with equal rights and were treated by the government on

that basis. Nonsense: the Middle East, like many parts of Europe, particularly the Eastern European parts from which the settlers came, were defined by communities.

There was and is a Jewish quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem (along with Muslim, Christian, and Armenian

Quarters); in the newer part of the city, there’s the Russian compound, a Bukharin quarter, a Yemenite quarter, and in the neighborhood of Rehavia a “Yekke” or German quarter. Moreover, some of the Jewish neighborhoods were subdivided by religious affinities: this is the courtyard of a Hasidic Rabbi, and this is the courtyard of a Lithuanian Rabbi, etc.

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People in the Middle East were not classified and did not live as individuals: their rights, their status, their residence, and their employment were based on the community with which they were associated. This notion of settler colonialism, where a handful of Jews who came to Palestine a century ago knew at that time that they were going to turn Palestine into an advanced, progressive, twenty-first century, democratic, integrated society is an anachronism. It's just sheer fantasy, it's nonsense, and it doesn't take the realities of the period into consideration.

An important observation here: when you take a look at the history of Zionism, you must remember that Zionism began within the Ottoman Empire. David Ben Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel, urged his colleagues during the First World War to have a Jewish legion to fight in the war on the side of the Turks, and it made sense. After all, the Ottoman Empire had existed for nearly half a millennium, and that's a long time for an empire to last. Nobody at the time knew that the Ottoman Empire was going to disintegrate, or the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or the Russian Empire. Nobody had read Barbara Tuchman's *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World Before the War, 1890-1914*. They did not know that the world, as they knew it, would soon disappear.

The Jews had come to Palestine as a small group, very often as individuals, and at other times small clusters of individuals or groups of people with a similar ideology. The notion that they were somehow going to overturn, carve out of that part of the world, and create a homeland within an Empire, it's just sheer nonsense. Looking back today, we can see that it doesn't make any historical sense.

Among the most curious objects in Ben-Gurion's home in Sde Boker, one of my personal favorites is a red fez with a tassel. This reflects the dominance of the Turks in the region. Ben-Gurion didn't learn Arabic when he came to Palestine; he learned Turkish. He went to Constantinople and within one year learned Turkish well-enough to prepare for a law degree because he intended to represent Zionism in the Ottoman parliament. We have to try to imagine the actors of the

period as they were, what they experienced and what they wanted, not what we project onto them. We also should not talk of some inherent and imagined logic of settlement but of the settlers' actual intentions.

A couple of other reasons why the model doesn't work. Are Jews really outsiders to the Middle East? Through the sixteenth century, most of the Jews of the world lived in the Middle East, beyond the

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Mediterranean. Even the Jews who came to Palestine in the early periods of Zionism came from lands that were proximate to the Ottoman Empire. The distance between Odessa and Tel Aviv is the same as the distance between Sana'a in Yemen and Tel Aviv. If you think about the extent of the Ottoman Empire, the Turks almost conquered Vienna in 1683. At that time, if you were a Hungarian, a Bulgarian, or a Romanian or lived in some parts of the Ukraine, or were a Greek Jew, you would have been a resident of the Ottoman Empire. Just as in the ancient world: *civis romanus sum*, I am a citizen of Rome. Wherever and whomever you were in the Roman Empire, you could say *civis romanus sum* and be acknowledged as part of that world.

Additionally, Palestine was a marginal backwater in the nineteenth century. The population of Palestine was 250,000 in 1800. By 1900 it was half a million. By some estimations, there were up to six times as many people in Palestine 2,000 years ago than there were in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, perhaps up to 3,000,000 people. This area had once been an important part of the Roman Empire.

But when you read British reports of exports from Palestine during

and immediately after the First World War, the prime exports were a few agricultural products, like olive oil, soap, and, of course, oranges – the famous Jaffa orange. There was no electricity in the country. The largest manufacturer had five or six workers, there were almost no steam engines. If you wanted to travel from Jaffa to Haifa during the winter, you wouldn't take a wheeled stagecoach or omnibus; you would take a boat because there were no good roads. Transportation was better in Roman times.

Palestine of the nineteenth century was an underdeveloped country to which a few crazed individuals, those Zionist pioneers who imagined themselves engaging in some kind of metahistorical, almost messianic task, had come in order to revivify, to rejuvenate. And how wonderful that some people appreciated that this is what they were intent on doing.

There are pictures and photographs of Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century; it is a well-documented country. My favorite photographer is Felix Bonfils, a Maronite Christian from Lebanon, who developed a very good business of creating postcards from photographs for sale to a rising tide of tourists. And among my favorite postcards is a picture of Jerusalem; it is the typical orientalist postcard with a westerner in mufti looking from Mount Scopus at the Dung Gate, the back of the walled city of Jerusalem, and to his left is a tree. That's all there is. One tree in a barren, evocative historic landscape.

Any number of contemporary travelers' accounts, including Mark Twain in *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), wrote that Palestine was a desolate, underdeveloped land. And it was to that desolate and underdeveloped land, rather than to a resource-rich country, that these Zionist colonialists came, without a mother country or a father country, without any kind of backing, and working for everything they achieved. Why did they do it? Was it really an economic motive? Even in the days when I made aliyah, the joke was if you want to make a small fortune in Israel, come with a large one. Those Zionist pioneers didn't even come with a small one.

Palestine in the early twentieth century was a hard place to come to, and most left. But there were those who survived, those who stayed, and the Jewish population of Palestine really began to grow significantly in the 1920s, partly because of the promise of the Balfour Declaration and partly because of the Johnson-Reed Act that in 1924 severely limited immigration to the United States.

Those early Zionists were of a very special breed. My favorite book on the subject is *Land and Desire in Early Zionism* (2011), by Boaz Neumann. The crucial word here is “desire”; Neumann collected the poems, the songs and the diaries of these Zionist immigrants. He wanted to try to understand how the settlers themselves experienced being colonialists. And what he comes up with is stories of the joy, the thrill of mixing one’s own sweat, one’s own blood, one’s own self with the land with which they identified.

This reminds us why the settler-colonial paradigm doesn’t work. In every other case that we know of, settlers took Europe with them to their new homes. For instance, outside the University of Sydney there is a community called Piccadilly, reminiscent of London. I was born in the United States – in a New England that contains a multitude of place names that resonate with the names of the places of origin of the settlers. There are also genuine American place names, which is what the word “Chicago” is: some say it’s a version of a local Native American word that means garlic or smelly onion.

But what did the Zionists do? In Israel there is no New Bialystok, there is no New Moscow, there is no New Berlin, there is no New Europe. Nor is there a New Baghdad or New Casablanca. Their place names came from their history, often from the Bible. The people who came did so to rediscover themselves. They were a people who came to reinvent, to rejuvenate themselves, or, to use the words of Balfour, to “reconstitute” themselves as a modern people in this land to which they had a connection.

The reinvention of Hebrew as a modern language produced similar

results because early speakers realized that there can be no modern Hebrew without referencing Jewish tradition, often with the language of the Bible. Of course, there are a lot of new words in Hebrew that come for other languages: the word “sababa,” for instance, is part of modern Hebrew but comes from Arabic. But the language itself is deeply informed by a literary tradition which is thousands of years old and whose roots are in the Land of Israel. It is not surprising that on Israel’s Independence Day, the national celebration ends with a Bible contest; that contest is a way in which modern-day Israelis affirm their identity through identification with geographic space.

Israel, a Jewish state, was not rejected solely by Palestinian Arabs, or the Arabs of the Middle East. The whole notion of denying Jews a state is about a century old, and its roots are ancient and are to be found in both Christianity and in Islam.

My point thus far has been to show that, in a strict social science sense, settler colonialism is not applicable to Zionism. But there’s something deeper than this that I want to discuss. Israel, a Jewish state, was not rejected solely by Palestinian Arabs, or the Arabs of the Middle East. The whole notion of denying Jews a state is about a century old, and its roots are ancient and are to be found in both Christianity and in Islam.

First of all, the critical question for Christians is: does God still speak to the Jews after Jesus appeared in the world? In short, if God does not speak to the Jews, then Christians are entitled to embrace replacement theology or supersessionism. The Church has replaced the ancient people. Jews in this narrative are to be passive; they are no longer actors in history. They are not deserving of independence. This concept is nearly 2000 years old, and it informs, by the way, some of the oppositional ideologies/theologies of many Palestinians.

For example, an early significant Palestinian rejection of the Balfour

Declaration was George Antonius's 1938 book, *The Arab Awakening*. The first chapters talk about the justifications for originally creating the mandate system after World War I, which designated Iraq, Syria and the contours of the modern Middle East. The last chapter is on the injustice of Palestine, and it is there that one finds the trope that Jews are not a people; they are merely a religion. Thus, according to Antonius, the Jews of the present are not connected with the Jews of the past. Even as Christianity is not a nationalism, Jews also belong to a confessional faith rather than an historic nationality.

A close friend of Antonius, British historian Arnold Toynbee, concurred; to use his famous words, Jews were "fossils." They were dead, no longer alive, merely existing as witnesses. In his books on the history of humankind, you will find all kinds of civilizations mentioned, but not Jewish civilization. He even uses the word "restoration," which suggests that Toynbee is countering the evangelicals like Balfour by arguing against the new Protestant theology called "restoration theology," which posits that the Jews are entitled to a land. This opposition is also picked up by Edward Said, the famous Palestinian academic, who opposed the idea that there was a Jewish people.

None of these men – Antonius, Toynbee, or Said – invented this concept; supersessionism became an official doctrine of the Catholic Church by the third century, and only in 1964, during Vatican II, will a major Christian entity, the Catholic Church, say that the Jews have the right to return to history.

This is, of course, a partial return, because even today the Vatican has difficulty conceptualizing Israel as a Jewish state; it only formally recognized Israel as a political entity in 1993, after the signing of the Oslo Accords. The most advanced Catholic thinkers will discuss the rights of Jews to live in Israel, but there are still conceptual difficulties in recognizing their polity as a Jewish state.

Mainline Protestants have different reactions to Israel. An example of a particularly virulent response was when an independent Presbyterian

I think what makes the issue of Israel/Palestine different from other kinds of conflicts is that it is one of the most written-about countries in history, in part because it exists at such a deep level within the imagination of Christians, Muslims and Jews.

group published *Zionism Unsettled: A Congregational Study Guide* (2014). While the Guide was never officially endorsed by the church and was actually removed from its website, it remains in circulation through independent sales. The Guide was largely produced by Sabeel, a movement founded by Palestinians that supports replacement theology, which clearly didn't die with Vatican II or with the alleged secularization of the world in which we live.

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part because it exists at such a deep level within the imagination of Christians, Muslims and Jews. However, we all see different countries. Each one of us – Catholics, Jews, Protestants, Muslims – have embedded within ourselves and our cultural traditions very different conceptions of the place.

My favorite story that illustrates this point is from Twain's *An Innocent Abroad*, where he relates that growing up in Hannibal, Missouri and reading the Bible, he imagined it to be a land of milk and honey but, once he actually visited, he found that the reality was very different. My point is, that we're all from Hannibal, Missouri. There isn't one of us who attended religious services or religious school who wasn't nurtured in a particular tradition, and this has a huge impact on how people of different religious traditions relate to the country.

For Jews, there is no one Jewish position on Israel. The ultra-Orthodox would argue that the the Land cannot be reclaimed until the Messiah comes. Because the Jews did not wait, says one ultra-Orthodox sect, the

Satmar, their efforts amounted to blasphemy, and that is why there was a Holocaust. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef said in 1978 that you can give up part of the land for *pikuach nefesh*, in order to save a life (although he would change his mind about that later on). Martin Buber would argue that Jews may settle in the country, but it has to be done ethically.

There was also a wonderful debate between Hanan Porat and Aviezer Ravitsky that took place at the National Academy of Sciences some years ago. Porat was, of course, the leader of Gush Emunim and Ravitsky was the leader and the founder of Meimad, a left wing religious Orthodox party that stood for compromise. Porat got up and said that he believed that the Land belonged to the Jews, that the Messiah was going to come, and that the Land would be ruled or governed by *halakha* (Jewish law). Ravitsky got up and said to Porat that the two of them studied at the same desk in the yeshiva of Rabbi Kook, which was the main training ground for a certain segment of religious Zionists. Ravitsky said that he, too, believed the Messiah would come and the country would someday be ruled by *halakha*. But the difference between the two of them, Ravitsky said, was that Porat knew when and by whom. Ravitsky did not. He was therefore open to compromise in the here and now.

In short, one could run through the whole litany of different religious traditions within Judaism and come to different kinds of positions, different understandings. They all agree, however, that they have an integral connection to the Land and that connection means that this is a place that they may inhabit.

Similarly, there is no one Christian tradition; there are many Christian traditions relating to the Holy Land. For Evangelicals, Jews' residence in the Land of Israel plays a great part in the End Times drama. For mainline Protestants, their relationship to Israel can be somewhat different. In the Presbyterian Guide that I mentioned earlier, there are two villains: one is Zionism, the other is Reinhold Niebuhr; there are one and a half chapters of the study guide that take Niebuhr apart. Why would that be in a study guide about Zionism? Because Niebuhr

was a passionate pro-Zionist, and, after Billy Graham, perhaps the most important Protestant thinker in America in the mid-twentieth century. Thus he had to be discredited. In truth, this was done less for what he had to say about Zionism than because he supported the Cold War, and that should begin to tell you something of the politics of the articulators of the Presbyterian Study Guide. Similarly, the Quakers are totally anti-Zionist. They are at the opposite end of a spectrum that extends to Christian Zionists.

Despite what we may hear about the overarching and overwhelming nature of opposition to Israel in the Islamic world, the reality is not so one-sided. After all, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat made sure he had the backing that he needed in order to make his historic visit to Jerusalem, which led eventually to a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. He was later assassinated for it, but he knew he could make that overture. And, of course, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan also concluded a peace treaty with Israel. The notion that peace treaties in the region are not possible is simply not true. One can also have a *hudna*, a temporary armistice, if one doesn't have a full treaty. A renewable *hudna* every ten years could lead to peace in a very pragmatic way. Within Islam there is latitude, but this must be contrasted with the underlying notion that the entire land is part of *dar al-Islam*, the abode of Islam, and what will ultimately happen, whether it's over a century or over the course of several centuries, only time will tell.

All of this is important because I don't think that secular discourse operates alone, and I'll explain what I mean by that. Until the end of nineteenth century the ways in which people claimed land was through theology. The Bible begins B'raysheet ba-RA Eh-lo-HEEM. Why, Rashi asks, does the Bible begin with "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," and he concludes that this is to stress that the Land belongs to God, to give to whomever God wishes: in this case, the Jewish people.

However, a significant contemporary and secular theory that begins to supplant religious theories was articulated in the Cherokee land cases

of the 1820s and 1830s by Chief Justice John Marshall. In the modern world, you cannot use religion to argue for land since that works only with co-believers. You may hold on to your private belief, but you can't go to the United Nations to justify your claims through religious sources. You need another language.

Chief Justice Marshall laid out the ways in which people can claim land. One, discovery; two, conquest; three, purchase; four, treaty; and five, improvement through labor. In short, nut gatherers have some rights, shepherds have some rights, but the farmer has more rights than anybody else. That was theory by mid-nineteenth century mores. By the end of the century a newer concept emerges: historical right, something Marshall doesn't mention at all. And I would argue today that history supplants theology as the way in which we argue about rights to land.

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And the truth about history, the allegedly secular discourse, divorced from religious motivation or any kind of theological text, is that it is, in fact, a veneer that operates on a parallel level with theology. It is no accident that even Zionism talks about the "promised land"; that is not a secular idea. Beneath the surface of all the debates about owning or controlling the Land, there is a substratum of religious tradition that informs all participants, secular and otherwise, in one way or another.

Indeed, many – if not most – of the people who live in the area and those who are concerned with that part of the world have, to one degree or another, a religious commitment to that place. In one way or another they measure their relationship to the Land in terms of their deep-rooted, millennia-old religious culture, a culture which has, at its base, religion.

What we read and hear now in discourse on the Israeli-Arab conflict, and what figures into the polemics of settler colonialism, is that Arab communities in Israel describe themselves as the indigenous of the Land. They hope to ascribe to themselves the rights of the native or indigenous peoples. Thus, “history” endows them with rights. If they can no longer use publicly the concept of *dar al-Islam*, the abode of Islam, it is incumbent upon them to find other, secular, language.

Now, however, history has become more important than religion, and I can give you one paradigmatic example and that will suffice for all. The most important word that has emerged in the debate on settler-colonialism is the word “indigenous.” The notion of native peoples morphed into indigeneity at some time in the 1960s and 1970s. The origin of the word is a case of a concept borrowed and applied to the Middle East conflict from other situations, and the application is very often distorted; something similar happened with liberation theology.

The notion of indigeneity begins with Central America and the attempt to preserve groups of natives from the exploitation of world capitalism. It spreads from there to Australia and to the First Peoples of Canada. The International Labor Organization (ILO) established a task force to define who is indigenous and what their rights are and, in 1989, created an Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention. There were two significant groups who were listed as indigenous peoples of the Middle East until recently, and they are the Berbers of North Africa and the Marsh Arabs of Iraq.

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There have been some notable court cases, including one concerning the legitimacy of the Al-Araqib Bedouin village in the Negev Desert that was heard two years ago this spring in Israel’s Southern District Court. One question was whether or not the Bedouins are natives of Israel. In fact, the court case decided otherwise; most of the Bedouins came in the nineteenth century, migrating from Egypt. And, indeed, if you think about my earlier comment, that only a quarter of a million people lived in Palestine in 1800, today, there are now almost 10,000,000 in the area. The country expanded by 20 times in the twentieth century. Who came and when? And the answer is: many different kinds of people. Thus, why are some people natives and others are not?

For example, the Circassians came in the 1870s from Eurasia, and the Templars came around the same time from Europe. There were Jews from Kurdistan and Yemen who came in the nineteenth century as well. What occurred in Palestine in the nineteenth century and why its population doubled was also the reason why cities in the region, such as Beirut, Izmir/Smyrna, Alexandria and Jaffa developed. The Ottoman Empire was coming into the nexus of European world capitalism and people were moving to the Mediterranean littoral. Indeed, one of the most important people in terms of the history of Palestine was Muhammed Ali, the ruler of Egypt in the 1830s, who came from Albania.

If it were possible to come from Albania and become a genuine leader of Egypt, a country across the Mediterranean, why couldn’t the Chelouche family, Jews from Algeria, move to Palestine? The Chelouche family helped found Neve Tzedek, a Jewish neighborhood which became a part of the new city of Tel Aviv. Is the grandchild of distinguished Israeli author Amos Oz, whose parents came from Eastern

Europe but was born in Jerusalem, a native? Is my granddaughter, who is descended from the Abu Hatzira family of Northern Africa, a family that made *aliyah* and came to Israel three centuries ago and whose progenitor was the Chief Rabbi of Tiberius, a native? Is she indigenous? How long does it take?

The politics of indigeniety as applied to Palestine-Israel is astounding. We may understand what indigeniety means for Australia's native peoples, who lived there for 40,000 years until the first English fleet arrived in the 1680s; that makes sense. But what about the Middle East and its constant ebb and flow of peoples and civilizations?

For example, Naim Ateek, the leading Palestinian liberation theologian who is also responsible for the Presbyterian Guide I mentioned earlier, will tell you that his surname is Ateek. In Arabic, Ateek means ancient, but he doesn't tell you that it means the same thing in Hebrew. And then he will tell you, quoting 1 Peter, chapter 2, verse 5, that he is a "living stone," because the verse goes on to say that out of these living stones, the new church will be built. He claims that his family has lived continuously in Palestine for 2,000 years. Really? With what proof? It's an assertion of faith and good intentions, it's a question of identity, but it is not a historical truth.

Both Muslims and Christians and a whole variety of other peoples assume the mantle of indigeniety to claim rights that supersede the rights of those European Jews who came in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, neglecting the fact that there also happen to be Jews of Middle Eastern origin, Arab Jews if you like. Or Jews who imagine themselves as Mediterranean Jews. Or the deep-seeded notion that Zionism is *shlilat ha'galut*, the negation of the exile. Or as some Jews understand their history: the ancient period in the Land of Israel and the modern period beginning in the 1880s are vital, but everything that happened in the diaspora is irrelevant.

Perhaps one last piece of evidence and I will make a final comment. Those of us who live in Israel believe we belong there. We feel a deep

connection with the Land. Today, 75% of all Israelis were born in the country, and there are multiple generations living there. In my case, four generations live in the Land, and in other cases the family has been there much longer. I would not confess to being a servant of any empire, nor apologize for building my life there and making the desert bloom. I am deeply aware of the fact that Zionism planted a quarter of a billion trees in a barren desolate land over the last century, the only place in the world that has gained forestland in that time. The fact is that the desert was reclaimed, that cities were built, that a new-old Hebrew literature with a Nobel Laureate (one so far, but more in the offing) was created.

I have no sense of a lack of authenticity and reality in that country called Israel. And I resent the charge that, somehow, I don't belong there. My name, after all, is now Ilan, it's not my American name of Selwyn. In coming here, I, too, was reinvented, as was David Green, who became David Ben-Gurion, and Golda Meyerson, who became Meir. That "reconstitution" is a reality, and it's a reality to be embraced that has real meaning. In short, this notion of settler-colonialism is a direct, vicious, visceral attack on who I am and who my people are and how I imagine my connection with other Jews in the past, the present and the future.

My final comment: what does one do with all of this? What do you do when you have such contradictory claims? And one thing people have tried to do is to emphasize a strategy of "parallel narratives." There's a wonderful book on the subject, edited by Robert Rotberg and published by the Indiana University Press: it's called *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict: History's Double Helix*. An essay in there by the late Dan Bar-On and Sami Adwan, "The Psychology of Better Dialogue between Two Separate but Interdependent Narratives," says essentially that we must explore the narratives of other people and we must do it with respect and with sensitivity.

But even in nature, parallel lines never meet; so too in these attempts at discourse. The notion that we could somehow ever create a unified narrative about the history of this place and to whom it belongs,

is chimerical, illusory. But parallel discourses enable one or should encourage one to have empathy for the other side; without empathy, there is no chance of moving forward.

One of the terrible aspects of BDS and its reliance on the colonial settler discourse is that it delegitimizes the authenticity of myself and my people, the Jews. It doesn't make possible real discourse. You can't invoke some kind of secular paradigm about doing away with the state, like the late Tony Judt once tried to do. You can't do that because there are other truths.

I'd like to quote from Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* ("Song of Myself" from *Leaves of Grass*, 1892) when he writes that he encompasses multitudes. To think that human beings have one identity and live on one level alone is just not true of the modern period. Sari Nusseibeh, a Muslim professor and public intellectual, was able to make an agreement with an Israeli counterpart, Mark Heller, about creating

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some kind of path to peace. Mohammed Dajani, a professor and peace activist who is also the scion of a very distinguished Palestinian Muslim family, would like to do the same. And there are also others who would like to engage in a kind of discourse that would produce a pragmatic result.

The last word – and it comes from the most important historical document that I know that is related to the fate of the Land – is from the 1937 Peel Commission Report on Palestine. What I find so absolutely fascinating and encouraging about that report is that the authors took testimony: they

had Jews speak and make their case, and they had Arabs speak and make their case. And they took both into account but then decided to be pragmatic and forge compromise.

There can be no pragmatism between contending parties unless there is mutual respect. The problem with BDS is that it forecloses any possibility of respectful interchange and honorable negotiations between the contending parties for the land that all consider not only theirs, but most consider holy.





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