"The moment has arrived to say 'yes' to the Americans," declared Ariel Sharon, "the moment has arrived to divide this tract of land between us and the Palestinians." Surely, a great many readers did not believe their eyes when reading the next sentences by the prime minister in Yediot Aharonot at the end of May 2003. "I have not hidden my position on the issue of the future Palestinian state," Sharon at the age of 75 explained. "I am not less connected to those tracts of land that we will be forced to leave in time than any of those who speak loftily. But you have to be realistic, [about] what can and what cannot stay in our hands."

For the first time, an Israeli government has accepted the Palestinian claim to eventual statehood at the end of the American-proposed Roadmap to peace. Some will see this as a change in paradigm, especially if they consult the main historical developments as researched by Munich historian Michael Brenner in his Zionism: A Brief History. Walter Laqueur has called the English version a "brilliant short survey" of a very controversial movement.

Brenner, a graduate of Columbia University, has since the mid-'90s published books about the renaissance of Jewish culture in the Weimar Republic, the Jewish rebirth in Germany after the Holocaust, and the Zionist Utopia and the Israeli reality. Here, in his latest book, six chapters deal with Zionism - in its early phase a kind of "international nationalism" - as a tool for emigration to Palestine, a stick for party discipline, a factor in British Mandatory policy and a pillar of today's Israel. A chapter about Zionism in the current struggle between the West and the Islamic East is missing.

Brenner takes the reader on a historical journey starting on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, revealing the ancient Jewish longing for the Promised Land that gave the modern national movement its name. We learn about American projects such as Ararat, just a stone's throw from Niagara Falls, a Utopia promoted by Mordecai Manuel Noah on the occasion of the fiftieth year of America's independence. Since the echo among Jewry was small, this former American sheriff in the state of New York two decades later developed the profound idea that Jews should return to Palestine. At the same time, in the middle of the nineteenth century, Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai of Sarajevo and Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer suggested the redemption of the Diaspora through the colonization of Palestine.

Noah and Alkalai, one a Sephardic and the other an Ashkenazi rabbi, were influenced by the spread of nationalism in Europe. But the assimilation of Jews in Central and Western Europe was well advanced. "As individuals, the Jews must be granted everything, but nothing as a nation," the French National Assembly declared in 1789. Jews should be normal citizens who might be distinguished from others by their religion but by nothing else. This was not the case in Eastern Europe, where social modernization developed slowly. There Jews lived apart from others in their shtetls, speaking Yiddish and nurturing the common wish of their ancestors to return one day to Palestine. As Brenner rightly points out, the concept of these people as citizens of Jewish faith would have been most unlikely in Poland, Romania or the Ukraine.
A "Political Map of Syria and Palestine" drawn at the U.S. Consulate in Bairut, Syria, in 1899. Americans and Europeans used to refer to Greater Syria, *bilad ash-Sham*, as Lebanon and/or Syria/Palestine whereas Arab inhabitants referred to themselves as Syrians, not Palestinians. As we can see, the American usage of Palestine, *filastin*, was a matter of the turn to the 20th century.
Thus, Jewish Europe was divided: emancipated in the West, ghettoized in the East. However, all over Europe the idea arose of Jewish liberation, not as a social but as a national question. Theodor Herzl, a classic example of the assimilated Jew, summed up the Zionist aims in his book *The Jewish State* in 1896. Jewry was to be discovered anew as a nation, leading to a state of its own. The murder of Tsar Alexander II and the Russian pogroms of 1881 and 1905 caused a great wave of emigration to Palestine, a land that for many Jews was just a stop en route to America.

Up to the end of World War I, about 2.5 million Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe to the United States. Only 70,000 went to Palestine, where they assimilated with Jews from the old *yishuv* of Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias and Jaffa. A small but significant number of American Jews immigrated to Palestine. The American consul of Jerusalem, Selah Merrill, complained in 1899 to the State Department about these Zionists. Merrill suggested an agreement with the Ottomans over what he called "the Jewish Question." With a migration wave (*aliya*) the modern *yishuv* developed first in some agrarian settlements into the left pillar of Zionism, an ideological mixture of nationalism, socialism and communism. In Tel Aviv and the Kibbutz Degania, Hebrew was revived as the common language. This was not accepted without disputes, but Hebraization went on swiftly.

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Summary of Selah Merrill's (1837-1909) complains about the "Jewish Question" in Palestine. He was more than three decades in Palestine as archeologist and U.S. Consul (with some breaks) between 1874 and 1907. Born in Connecticut, he was a pioneer, explorer, diplomat, and scholar.
Fundamental myth

There was both cooperation and confrontation with the local inhabitants. Should Arabs be allowed to work in kibbutzim? Herzl had not envisaged tensions. Later, in his book Old New Land he underlined that Zion is only Zion if tolerance and equality rule there. In his Utopian novel, Rashid Bey states that Jews were welcomed not as conquerors but as cultural mediators. In 1936, Jews already constituted one-third of the population. Bloody conflicts reached their climax in an Arab uprising, called then an intifada.

It was a fundamental myth, says Brenner, that Zionist activists talked about "a land without people." The awakening for them was bitter. There was no place for the true interests of Arabs in Herzl's work, claims Michael Brenner. It was the same with David Ben-Gurion. "We can't recognize the rights of Arabs for the land in Palestine," he said at a party congress in 1924, "since they don't work the fields." Khalil Sakakiny made a mockery of this in the paper Filastin: "Welcome, cousins! We are the guests and you are the masters of the house." He hit the nail on the head; the kibbutzim had begun to change the country. Nevertheless, not many immigrants were lured; most preferred an urban life.

---Updated 10-2008---

Picture drawn by Themistocles von Eckenbrecher (1842-1921) after visiting Palestine in 1899.

Two states for two peoples?

As the Nazis came to power, immigration rose. London, on the other hand, tried to maneuver between Arabs and Jews so as not to lose one group of potential supporters in the coming war against the Axis powers. The British not only weakened Lord Balfour's promise of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, they revoked it. First, the report of secretary Earl Peel in 1937 suggested a two-state solution. Ben-Gurion reluctantly agreed, since he had obtained approval of his wish for an independent Jewish state. After much zigzagging, London finally released the White Paper of May 1939: there was to be an independent state of Palestine within ten years, and Jewish immigration would be stopped after five years. But Arabs, under the leadership of Grand Mufti Amin al-Husaini, did not recognize this historic chance. They rejected the proposal; they wanted the state and the immigration to end at once.

Brenner shows how London's attempts to reduce illegal immigration turned out. Sending the ship Exodus back to Germany in 1947 and blockading Holocaust survivors in Cyprus were acts instrumental in the decision to create a Jewish state. After Menachem Begin's extremists carried out their bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, London turned its mandate for Palestine over to the United Nations. The newly established body decided according to the principle of "two states for two peoples." But the 1948 proclamation of Israel as a state also meant war, since the Arabs and others saw this as an unjustified step. In their traditional (Ottoman) view, the Jews constituted only one of many minorities in Palestine and were not eligible for a state of their own.
David and Goliath

At the beginning of the new millennium, Zionism appears not only to have fulfilled itself but to have become outmoded. Brenner discusses both optimistic and pessimistic trends. Inasmuch as Zionism led to a national state, it was a success. But, as it took from the local population both peace and land, it is still just a success on the surface.

Most Jews do not live in Israel. Though it integrated immigrants from all over the world, the majority came from countries with non-democratic traditions or unstable conditions, like Ethiopia or the former Soviet Union. Israelis from developed countries are rare. Indeed, it is now a prosperous state without peace. Its founding terrorism, as at Dair Yasin, played a dark role. The David, says Brenner, that managed to become a surviving Goliath in the wars lost a great deal of credit as an occupation force.

As the philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz claimed, "Israel lost the Six-day War on the seventh day." How fragile the state is without peace was demonstrated with the assassination of Premier Yitzhak Rabin. After new waves of Palestinian terror, Benjamin Netanyahu and Ariel Sharon came to power. And both of them, for ideological and other reasons, allowed more settlements in the occupied territories, too.

Main contradiction

As an outgrowth of European nationalism, Zionism attracted mostly Ashkenazim, who still dominate. Some want to see Israel as a liberal state for all citizens; others don't want to put its Jewish character at risk. Whether or not the era of post-Zionism has begun, Brenner leaves open. He cites Zionists who regard their mission as accomplished only if the majority of Jews live in Israel and if there is no more hatred against Jews. But he also cites those who would like to see Zionism end in a less ideological kind of patriotism and citizenship.

Michael Brenner has written a timely, well-balanced and readable short history of Zionism.

But Brenner should have pointed out more specifically the implications of the continuing settlements in the Occupied Territories. Behind it there is the Zionist promise of land in Palestine, then later in Israel and neighboring areas. But there was never a land without people; so Zionism from the beginning was based on erroneous preconditions. Some admission of the error began when Israel dissolved the first settlements in the Sinai after the peace accord with Egypt. A lot more shall follow, as the discussion about leaving the Gaza Strip indicates. No democratic state can claim something for itself that it is not ready to give to all of its citizens and neighbors. This also includes the matter of restitution for Palestinians.

This is the main contradiction of Zionism: on the one hand, the promise to all Jews of a national home with land and a state, even in occupied territory; on the other hand, the inevitable need to destroy this covenant. According to Ariel Sharon's remarks cited at the beginning, the time might now have come for this partial withdrawal. But the Oslo peace process broke down in blood, so one should harbor no illusions.

There is still a long way to go. Meron Benvenisti, a former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, raised this tough question in his memoirs: "Did we not have a special responsibility, if ever we turned out to be victors? What have we done with the vanquished enemy? Have we transformed a struggle for survival into an ethnic-cleansing operation, sending people into exile because we wanted to plunder their land?"


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