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Old Zionism and Modern Israel

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What I felt sixty years ago, when I joined the Zionist movement, is essentially what I feel today. I joined this national movement because it was not called Jewish nationalism but Zionism. Zion is not just a symbol of national power and national survival, but a great symbol of the fulfillment of a great Messianic hope of humanity. This is the hope of humanity in the process of becoming, of being born--a humanity consisting of many peoples with the people of Israel, as the prophet Isaiah said, leading the other people, and with Zion as the center.

This humanity must begin with one people living in justice and love with its neighbors, and the neighbors with their neighbors, and so forming a great humanity encompassing all of mankind. I believed that this nationalism would not go the way of all the others--beginning with a great hope and then deteriorating, decaying, becoming collective egoism, even daring, like Mussolini, to call itself a 'sacro egoismo', as if a collective egoism could be more sacred than the egoism of any individual.

This hope that I had sixty years ago, I maintain today in my heart, notwithstanding what occurred and what occurs. I am now no less a Zionist, in this sense of Zion, than I was then. I had to endure many disappointments, but in every hour I felt that this hard way, this way of error is the way to fulfillment.

The ways of history are ways of disappointment and bitterness--ways of the spirit's being vanquished again and again, yet ending with its victory. None of us young men of that time thought about mere survival, and no one

thought about historical rights. We had to go back to Palestine in order to determine the contents and the forms of our own life, not for our sake but for that hope with the prophets called Zion.

As long as the means used to attain an aim are in their very nature opposed to this aim, the goal attained will deteriorate and become more like the means than the original aim. This is the great danger for Israel today. When we returned to Palestine, the decisive question was: Do we want to come there as an ally, as a friend, as a brother, as a member of the coming community of the peoples of the Near East, or as the representatives of colonialism and imperialism ?

This discrepancy between aims and means, between the goal and the way to achieve it, divided the Zionists into people who wanted to get from the great powers particular political concessions and people, mostly young men, some of them my friends, who simply wanted to be allowed to work in Palestine together with their neighbors, for Palestine and for the future.

What was then begun in Palestine by the people called pioneers, Chaluzim, was a kind of work the like of which I do not know in history. The people who went to Palestine went there because they could not find meaning in and fulfillment of their lives in any other place. This great work that went on by selected and devoted persons was the work of building, not a political state, but a great human collective community, with their neighbors helping them and being helped by them, and together developing a common political expression in which they and we could find fulfillment.

The evolutionary collective action could not always be carried out in perfect peace with the Arabs, but in general it was based on good neighborly relations between a Jewish village and a neighboring Arab village, between Jews and their Arab neighbors.

Effects of Hitlerism

This organic phase of the settlement in Palestine went on till the days of Hitler. It was Hitler who brought Jewish masses to Palestine, not selected people who felt that there they must fulfill their lives and prepare the future. So, selective organic development was replaced by mass immigration and the indispensable necessity to find political force for its security.

This was the hour when my great friend, the late Judah Leib Magnes, and I, and other friends felt that we must state clearly our own proposals. But the majority of the Jewish people preferred to learn from Hitler rather than from us. Hitler showed them that history does not go the way of the spirit but the way of power, and if a people is powerful enough, it can kill with impunity as many millions of another people as it wants to kill. This was the situation that we had to fight.

We of the Ichud made two suggestions, either one of which could have led the Jews and Arabs not only to coexistence, which was not enough in that critical hour, but to cooperation, the only possible form of coexistence in the Near East. The one was the plan for a bi-national state; the other was the plan for a federation. Magnes inclined more to the bi-national state, and I think he was right.

At that time this plan had a chance. I am inclined to think that the plan which now has a future is the one for a federation, of which the State of Israel would be a member with equal rights and with a Magna Charta making its autonomous national civilization secure.

This would make possible the economic development of the Near East through which the Near East could make a great and essential contribution to the future of mankind. Things happened otherwise, as we know. We made the wrong political entry in Palestine: -- partition -- followed by the war of the Arabs against partition and against Israel. The most urgent question for us now is the question of the Palestine Arab refugees.

Already ten years ago, I proposed that Israel should take the initiative and invite all the interest groups, states and churches alike, to a conference in order to work out a common solution to the problem of the refugees. The question of the refugees is decisive for Israel, yet so far as I can see, there is no Israel-Arab policy at all. Thus a situation has developed that is incomparably more difficult than any earlier one.

We, the small minority of the spirit, have tried to point to the simple truth, that no peace is any longer possible between Jews and Arabs unless it takes the form of cooperation and federation. No small peace can be attained any longer; no weak, cheap peace that contains within itself the seeds of self-destruction. The Jewish-Arab situation today is the same as the situation in the rest of the world in this most critical hour in the history of mankind. The greatest obstacle in this terrible situation is the fact that people are not communicating with one another, that anything one nation says to another is received with universal distrust.

Nobody really talks to another. So-called political speeches on the world situation are sheer propaganda. There is no hope for this hour so long as we do not find a way really to talk to one another about common interests, the common hope, the common will, and then return to the world of politics and say the truth in common.