



‘A Miserable Provincial Town’: The Zionist Approach to Jerusalem from 1897-1937

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Singing and dancing in ‘New Jerusalem’ among the Zionist movement on the day the UN partition plan was announced in 1947.

Source: Central Zionist Archives

“**W**hen I remember thee in days to come, O Jerusalem, it will not be with pleasure,” Theodor Herzl wrote after his only visit to Palestine in 1898. He recorded that the musty deposits of 2,000 years of inhumanity, intolerance, and uncleanness lay in the city’s foul-smelling alleys, and that no deeper emotion came to him because of the superstition and fanaticism that he felt there. Herzl, in fact, dreamed of establishing the capital of Israel in northern Palestine.¹

Despite the fact that the very name of the Zionist movement derives from one of Jerusalem’s, the issue of Jerusalem did not occupy an important place in the discussions and decisions of the movement and its leaders in 1897, when Jewish representatives from all over the world met to discuss Herzl’s idea to establish a state for the Jewish people as a practical solution to the ‘Jewish problem’. Jerusalem was hardly mentioned: “The literal restoration of the glories of ancient Zion was not on their agenda, but they could not dispense with the older mystique.”²

This article will discuss the Zionist approach toward the city of Jerusalem from the movement's early days until 1937, tracing the transformation of Zionist attitudes through the eyes of three Zionist leaders, and engaging the turning points of the establishment of the Hebrew University and the 1929 revolt.

At the 1903 congress, when Herzl suggested the possibility of establishing a Jewish state in Uganda, he was supported by many of the more religious-minded Jews and opposed explicitly by secular Zionists such as Chaim Weizman and by the majority of the delegation from Tsarist Russia. Religious Jews seemed to think that it did not matter where Jews in trouble established themselves, because God had guaranteed that all Jews would ultimately be returned to the Promised Land. Ideologically, however, the Zionist settlement movement was not religious or traditional; it was practical, which put it in conflict with the religious and traditional Jewish population of Jerusalem.

The Zionist organization pursued a broad aim of building an independent Jewish society in Palestine by establishing a widespread system of settlements based on developed, intensive agriculture to provide employment for the many workers who came with the second Aliyah (1904-1914). The class-conscious young workers in turn influenced the Zionist Organization, not only by realizing its aims, but also by leading it toward a more socialistic approach. The new settlement movement—at first, that of the second Aliyah, and later, also of the third Aliyah (1919-1923)—became increasingly permeated with principles of cooperation and social equity.³

The founders of the Zionist movement had consciously tilted toward secularism (and thus away from the revered city, Jerusalem), in order to transform the Jewish people as a whole into a modern secular national society. At the beginning of the immigration of the Lovers of Zion to Palestine, Zalman Levontin, who bought the land at Rishon LeZion as the first Jewish settlement, referred to “the conflict and the different opinions of our brothers in Jerusalem”.⁴ Later, however, Levontin's seeming lack of interest in Jerusalem appeared to change. He wrote in 1906 to the head of the Zionist movement, David Wolfson (Herzl's successor): “We don't know who will possess Jerusalem in the future; all the other religions built churches in Jerusalem, and the Zionists should build a home in order to develop belief in the way that they can affect Zionists practically, culturally and politically”.⁵

Zionist leaders and establishments were not enthusiastic about investing in Jerusalem in this early period. For instance, when Jerusalem leader David Yavin established the Institute for the Protection of Jewish Historic and Religious Places, he asked the Zionist office to help its cause by purchasing the sites of the Wailing Wall, David's Tower, the Jewish cemetery in Nablus and the Grave of the Rabbis in Tiberius. The response of the *Keren haYesod* was negative, because of the low commercial value

of the property. The question is whether this rejection was truly based on economic concerns, or rather reflected a lack of interest on the part of the Zionist movement in embracing icons of the past.⁶

Another example of the movement's priorities can be found in the opening of the Zionist office in Jerusalem. The Palestine office, headed by Arthur Ruppin, opened in Jaffa in 1908. It moved to Jerusalem only in 1914, though the decision to move had been taken in 1913, because the Acting Committee delayed giving its permission for the move,⁷ possibly because it wanted to avoid attracting the attention of the superpowers. Finally the office was moved after Jerusalem had already become the centre of events, the headquarters for the British Mandate, and for the Palestinian leadership. At least until the eve of the First World War, the Zionist leadership shied away from making Jerusalem the centre of their plans and projects in Palestine, due to the city's importance for both Islamic and Christian states.

Broadly, therefore, one can conclude that Zionist institutions initially neglected Jerusalem. Ruppin admitted: "Our mistake was that we didn't engage enough of the Jewish population of the city, even though dealing with the issue of the *halakha* [monies donated by the Jewish Diaspora to Jews in Palestine in order to maintain their existence there, especially in Jerusalem], was the most difficult thing; despite that, we shouldn't have neglected it."⁸

Yossef Klauzner wrote in the *Shiloah* Journal: "Two big mistakes were committed by the Lovers of Zion, (and the first Zionists as well) that they pushed the Arab question under the rug, and [that they] abdicated the issue of Jerusalem. All our efforts must be focused on both issues."⁹

Jerusalem vs. Tel Aviv

In order to understand the Zionist movement's approach toward the issue of Jerusalem, it is helpful to compare it with the approach toward Tel Aviv. Tel Aviv was founded in 1909 on sand dunes north of Jaffa. From its beginnings and even to this day, the city has represented 'the new Israel'. In the eyes of wide segments of the Jewish population, Tel Aviv is contemporary and secular, while Jerusalem has remained profoundly marked by the many centuries of Jewish religious life that predate modern Zionism.¹⁰

At least until the First World War, the Zionist movement ignored Jerusalem and focused only on the new *Yishuv* centred in Jaffa because it assumed that it must do so in order to implement the national desires of the modern movement. As such, the Zionist Commission established its offices in Jaffa not Jerusalem. In addition, most of the Zionist leaders preferred to live in Tel Aviv. For instance, when Ahad Haam finally

moved to Palestine in early 1922, he chose to reside in Tel Aviv and not in Jerusalem, even though his son was moving to Jerusalem because he had been appointed to a post in the education department of the British government under the Mandate. The major reason for Ahad Haam's choice was that many of his personal friends were in Tel Aviv.¹¹

Jaffa thus became the centre of the Zionist initiative and since the beginning of the twentieth century, has been the economic centre of the Jewish *Yishuv* in Palestine. Ruppin writes about the differences between Jerusalem and Jaffa, saying that Jaffa was not under the pressure of the Old *Yishuv*, which was anti-productive and against innovation. Therefore Jaffa became the centre of modern life in Palestine.¹²

The novelist Shai Agnon compared Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in his book *Yesterday Before Yesterday*:

*The nights of Jerusalem MISSING? but the days are languid. The sun burns like a flame; the garbage exudes a stench and the city is suffused by sadness. The clods of hardened mud assault your legs and you skip over the rocks like those foul-smelling goats. At every turn you encounter either garbage and filth or a beard and side-curls, and when you approach one of them he flees from you as if he has seen a ghost. Whereas Jaffa ...is chock-full of gardens, vineyards and orchards, it has the sea and coffee-houses and young people and every day one see new faces...*¹³

The image of Jerusalem as a compared with that of Tel Aviv was only part of the problem. Another reason Jewish leaders were reluctant to devote more attention and to resources to Jerusalem was the nature of its Jewish population. Most of them had been living in Jerusalem from before the emergence of the new Zionism, and most were religious.

Old *Yishuv* Jews in general were more religiously- rather than politically- or ideologically-minded. This difference created tension between the two *Yishuvs*, and marked by some ambivalence on the part of the Old *Yishuv*. On the one hand, Old *Yishuv* Jews were critical of the New *Yishuv* Jews' behaviour and deterred by their ideology; on the other hand, they were glad for their numbers and the resources they brought to the city.¹⁴ The population of Jerusalem on the eve of the First World War was 45,000 of the 85,000 Jews in Palestine; this number reduced by half after the war. The Jews living in Jerusalem were economically more vulnerable than were other Jews because of their dependence mainly on the money brought through *halakha*.¹⁵

The Old *Yishuv* rejected both the Zionist idea and cooperation with the secular Zionists. At the same time, the Zionists had little sympathy for the Jews who were already in the land because the community had long been supported by alms from

abroad, as its members were waiting for the glories that God had promised for the End of Days.¹⁶

Also the average age of members of the Old *Yishuv* did not fit Zionist agricultural plans, and the fact that most of them were married with children made things more difficult.¹⁷ Even when deputy director of the Zionist Palestine office Tahan tried in 1913 to find people from the Old *Yishuv* to work in Bir Nabala near Jerusalem, he did not succeed. He concluded that the Jews in Jerusalem didn't want to work in agriculture.¹⁸

Before the Zionist Commission headed by Weizman moved to Jerusalem, two separate committees were elected in the city, and both sought recognition from the British Mandate as representatives of the Jewish community. The first was the Committee for Jewish People Living in Jerusalem, which was supported by the city's Zionist leaders. The second was the Ashkenazi Committee, which was elected by the Council committee, the committee of all the *Kolelim* representing the old Ashkenazi *Yishuv*. It is notable that when British Mandate representatives asked the Zionist Commission to solve the dispute, this was interpreted as the Mandate's recognition of the special role of the Zionist Commission. This recognition politically and practically maintained Zionist leaders' superior position over the traditional and religious leaders of the Old *Yishuv*.¹⁹

The reservations of the Old *Yishuv* about the Zionist leaders' way of life included reservations about their urbanity, as well as their plan to create new and modern Jewish quarters, such as Jaffa. This idea was suggested by Arthur Ruppin as soon as he entered office in 1908, with the hopes of promoting not only a new neighbourhood, but a revitalized Jewish class and social life.²⁰ Meanwhile, the Zionists believed that the Old *Yishuv* in Jerusalem must undergo a lengthy re-education, to inspire a new spirit and mind. Their way of life must be changed, and they must be pushed to work, earning their bread with their own hands.²¹

Jerusalem and the Rural Settlements

Ruppin's plan and the approach of the Zionist movement to settlement in general (and settlement in the Jerusalem region in particular) raised conflicting ideas. Large-scale settlement in mountainous regions based on intensive, modern agriculture was considered impractical by some. In the 1890s, Michel Pinnes wrote: "The land in the mountains will not be the basis for founding of settlements of people who expect to earn their daily bread from what will grow in the earth."²² However, Menachem Sheinkin, the Lovers of Zion's representative in Palestine, wrote later in 1913:

*The mountains are around Jerusalem, and all are fit for growing various fruit trees and forests; many of these hills have already passed into other hands that covered them with delightful gardens and shady groves. But there still remain thousands of dunams that can come into our possession. Hundreds of Hebrew workers will find employment and a livelihood in preparing the soil, building terraces, and planting trees, and we will surround Jerusalem with a glorious worth of farms and settlements full of labor and life... what more need be said about the value and necessity of this great project?*²³

Ze'ev Tzahor, professor of the modern history of Israel, says that the priority given to settling in the Negev and rural areas in Palestine is not surprising. The concept of desolate or wild land was seized upon as a positive opportunity. The pioneer Jews were aware of the lack of water in the Negev and rural areas, but believed they could overcome the obstacles.

*The pioneer Zionist settlers built their houses far from Jerusalem and they gave to the settlements they built new names like Petah Tikva, Rishon LeZion, Yesod Hama'ala, and Rosh Pina. Berl Katzenelson was one of the prominent leaders of the Zionist movement before establishing the State; he came twice to the Galilee before coming for the first time to Jerusalem.*²⁴

In the early 1920s, a fierce debate arose within the Zionist Organization over where the Jewish National Fund (JNF) should invest its money. Should it purchase the lands of the Greek Orthodox patriarchate in Jerusalem, which were then offered for sale, or should it purchase the land of the Yizrael valley for co-operative agricultural settlement?²⁵ The choice was clear, and the lands of the Yizrael Valley were obtained.

Pioneering Zionism has been characterized by agricultural bias, stemming mainly from the belief that the country would be conquered through the conquest of the soil, and the society revived by creating a healthy Jewish peasantry. It seems that the Zionist pioneers agreed with Arthur Hantke, who said in 1923:

*[It is self-evident] that the national existence of a nation in a country depends upon the question whether it is successful in the cultivation of its soil. The city oriented itself by the country... If we are forced to decide between the amount of work to be devoted to the city and the countryside, we must always bear in our consciousness that the decision falls in the countryside and the city follows the country.*²⁶

The same sentiments were expressed by Bergman: "...the Jewish spirit sought to be rooted in the land. The villages were given the task of materializing this taking root. And from the village this spirit was supposed to spread out and influence the city".²⁷

The mainstream of the Zionist effort was thus directed toward the establishment of a series of agricultural communities, the best known among them the *kibbutz*, a collective agricultural settlement, and the *moshav*, a cooperative agricultural settlement. These, in particular the former, soon became known for their daring social innovations and the ability to take root and prosper under difficult conditions.²⁸

Jerusalem as Polemical Tool and Heritage

The various early Zionist attitudes towards Jerusalem can be found in the writings of its most prominent figures. For example, secular Herzl, with his background in international relations, felt that the issue of Jerusalem must be left out of the calculations of the Zionist movement, at least initially. What was most important was to solve the dilemma of the Jewish people, who were scattered across the world, economically, politically and socially by gathering them in their own territory supported through donations. Which territory they came to was a marginal issue; his vision was “secular, cosmopolitan and pluralist rather than distinctively Jewish”.²⁹

Herzl believed, in fact, that Jerusalem would be one of the principal obstacles that the Zionist movement would confront on its way towards attaining political sovereignty in Palestine. For example, he obtained information that the Vatican would oppose any political entity in Jerusalem. He believed that the problem of ownership of the holy places could put his entire plan for Zionist settlement in danger. Therefore, from the outset in 1896, he preferred to give up Jerusalem in return for the hope of gaining recognition of Jewish sovereignty over the remaining portions of Palestine. It is not by accident that Jerusalem was mentioned for the first time in his book as a polemic tool: “All through the long night of their history the Jews have never ceased to dream this kingly dream. ‘Next year in Jerusalem’ is our old watch word. It’s now a matter of showing that dream can be converted into an effective thought for broad daylight.”³⁰ In order to eliminate this obstacle, Herzl suggested a plan to declare old Jerusalem an international area. He was “prepared in 1902 to exclude Jerusalem and the entire south of the country from the domain of Jewish sovereignty in return for sovereignty over part of Palestine”.³¹

As Herzl became more involved in political activities, he became increasingly sensitive to the unique and complicated status of the city. As such, he distinguished between old Jerusalem and the ‘New Jerusalem’, between the ‘earthly Jerusalem’ and the ‘heavenly Jerusalem’. In the novel *Altneuland*, Herzl proposed ‘exterritoriality’ for the Old City, which would belong to all nations as a centre for the institutions of “believers, love, and science”.³²

The entire ancient, holy city should be free of daily traffic. All those unkempt, noisy peddlers should be banned from within these walls that are

*venerated by all creeds. Workers dwellings and inexpensive home should be built in the environs of the city. The markets should be moved from the city to suitable spots outside. Thus cleaned, the old city would be left to the charitable and religious institutions of the all creeds which then could amicably divide up this area among themselves. The entire old city could gradually be reconstructed in its present style. But under salubrious conditions it would then be a great jewel that could place into the rich setting of the modern, elegant city.*³³

By contrast, Menachem Usishkin began his Zionist activities far from Jerusalem only to become gradually interested in settling the city. Usishkin headed *Hovevei Zion* (Lovers of Zion), the most active organization, which sought to encourage Russian Jews to immigrate to Palestine at least 20 years before the establishment of the Zionist movement. He and his group played a crucial role in crystallizing the Zionist approach following the pogroms of the 1880s, which emphasized for him the necessity for Jewish emigration.

Usishkin was a practical Zionist who viewed agricultural settlement in Palestine as the first and most important step toward attaining a Jewish state. Unlike the Zionist movement, however, Usishkin and the Lovers of Zion felt that the creation of *Eretz Israel* should comprise both rural and urban settlement. In practice, the focus was on the former. One impetus was that agricultural land was cheaper than urban land.³⁴

Usishkin saw in the people of Jerusalem and their attitude toward the city neglect and ignorance.³⁵ He concluded that “Jerusalem is a hopeless case and there is no way to repair it.”³⁶ And until the end of 1912, Usishkin’s approach never differed from that of the Lovers of Zion.³⁷ Usishkin visited Jerusalem three times, in 1891, in 1903, and at the end of 1912 through the beginning of 1913. Only during the last visit did his attitudes about the city begin to change. He noticed changes in the city itself in the form of new institutions, and a different spirit among the new generation. Moreover, Usishkin recognized the importance of the city’s sacred places. He said that the Western Wall was the most contaminated place in the city, the most neglected, and surrounded by the worst of the Arabs.³⁸ “We committed a mistake,” he said afterwards, “regarding our metropolitan; we relinquished our Jerusalem, the heart of our nation’.³⁹ In a lecture entitled “To Guard Jerusalem”, Usishkin said:

The land of Israel without Jerusalem is Palestine. The people of Israel for hundreds of years didn’t say ‘Next Year in Israel’ they said ‘Next year in Jerusalem’. For them Jerusalem meant Eretz Israel. This sentiment saved the nation, and such sentiments should be taken in to our considerations. If we don’t understand that, if we take our steps only regarding our daily needs, we uproot the tree from its roots. We can create Jaffa and Tel Aviv, but we can not create new Jerusalem or new Zion. Behind all Zion is the old Jerusalem.

Once they wanted to build the sacred Temple in Egypt but it didn't work; in Bet Hakerm [a neighbourhood outside the Old City walls] it is impossible to find Zion. Zion is found inside the walls, not outside of them.⁴⁰

Coming many years after Herzl, Chaim Weizman had a major effect both on the future of the Zionist movement, on its political enterprise and on its policy toward the city of Jerusalem. He contributed to issuing the Balfour Declaration, which indirectly affected the issue of Jerusalem, and he worked to establish the Hebrew University in his role as head of the Zionist Commission in Palestine after World War I.

Like Herzl, Weizman wanted to find a special solution to the issue of Jerusalem. But unlike him, Weizman's Zionism was rooted in ancient traditions, in Jewish ways and thoughts. He was conscious of the sensitivity of the subject of Jerusalem. But he believed – more so than Herzl and the other secular leaders of the Zionist Movement – in the special connection between Jews and Jerusalem and of the importance of strengthening this connection. He manoeuvred his policy between these practical political and spiritual demands, all the while expressing mixed feelings about Arab and Jewish Jerusalem, the value of religious Jerusalem and the problematic nature of the Old *Yishuv*.

Weizman's first direct experience of Jerusalem was in 1907 when he visited Palestine for the first time. Though he spent one full month in Palestine, he spent only one day in Jerusalem, and then only after first spending a week visiting Jaffa and the other colonies. His visit fell on Yom Kippur, and on this day he wrote to his wife "I spent a day here and am going back to Jaffa. A great many impressions." And, on the next day, "Just returned from Jerusalem, where I spent only one day. It was extremely interesting."⁴¹

In 1918, Weizman was appointed head of the Zionist Commission in Palestine, which as soon to move its headquarters to Jerusalem. When Weizman came to the city, he was shocked at its condition, especially for the Jewish people living there. He wrote in his diaries:

It is sad, very sad in Jerusalem! There are very few of us there. Neither the heart nor eye perceives a single Jewish institution! On the contrary, there is so much of the foreign elements strong oppressive, threatening! The minarets and the bell-towers and the domes rising to the sky crying that Jerusalem is not a Jewish city! There are few young Jews there, and the old ones make a dreadful impression. They are all broken-off splinters, dusty, feeble, soft, and covered with age-old mould. The Jewish quarters in Jerusalem are nothing but filth and infection. The indescribable poverty, stubborn ignorance and fanaticism- the heart aches when one looks at it all!! To organize Jerusalem, to bring some order into that hell, it's a job that is going to take a long time and require the strength of the giant and the patience of an angel!⁴²

Weizman's unsatisfactory impressions from the complication of the city in all aspects and regards, especially from the system of the Old *Yishuv* cast its shadow through all his doings. He wrote to Balfour:

*...As an instance of what I mean, let me mention the case of Jerusalem, which we have very carefully. What is Jerusalem? It is two things: on the one hand a city of dirt and squalor, a home of physical and moral disease, the sorry domain of a corrupt Arab municipality, on the other hand, the centre of a nation's traditions and hopes, a city whose name sends a thrill of reverence and of aspiration through millions of hearts. Is the capture of Jerusalem to mean the capture of a squalid oriental town, and only that, or is it to be the starting-point of an epoch in which the actual Jerusalem will make some approximation to the ideal?*⁴³

Weizman's attention to the spiritual Jerusalem was focused on the Wailing Wall, or the Western Wall, believed to have been part of the original walls of the Second Temple, held sacred by Jews. If Herzl had suggested, as a solution acceptable to the world community the ex-territorial idea and turning the Old City into a museum for all nations, Weizman wanted to see the Western Wall under Jewish control. He wrote in his diaries to the British Minister William Ormsby-Gore:

*The hope has long been cherished that someday the Wall and neighbouring land might pass into Jewish hands and the site be put into a condition not unworthy of the memories and aspirations which it symbolizes. We feel that at the present time, when the Jewry are looking forward to a revival of its national life, would be all times the most fitting for the carrying out of this project. We accordingly ask for permission to open investigations with a view to ascertaining how and on what terms the site can be transferred to Jewish control. If that permission is granted, we hope in due course to be able to put forward a proposal for its acquisition.*⁴⁴

Relations with the Old *Yishuv* also affected Weizman's approach to Jerusalem. Like Herzl, he saw them as an obstacle to obtaining Jewish goals in Palestine and Jerusalem. He wrote to his wife:

*What you do find there in plenty are schnorrers [Yiddish for 'sponger']! Just imagine, some of the representatives of 'Orthodoxy' denounced us to the government as a dangerous lot, we intended to overthrow the king...tiresome people! Hardly any firm principles. Whatever there was before has been largely destroyed by the war. It will take a long time, and require many new elements to heal the wounds and inject fresh streams.*⁴⁵

Hebrew University and the New Jerusalem

The foundation of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1925 was the outcome of intensive effort and arguments within the Zionist movement. This debate, however, encapsulates the debate over Jerusalem's problematic nature for the early Zionists.

When the Zionist movement laid the university's foundation stone in 1918 on Mount Scopus, and when it established its first faculties in 1925, it was considered a great achievement in making the city both Jewish and secular and modern. Weizman said it was like establishing the Third Temple.⁴⁶ According to Hagit Lavsky, "The establishment of the modern spiritual national centre in the heart of the concrete and Orthodox Jerusalem, which was considered the core of resistance to secular Zionism, became a challenge. Through the ceremony of butting the corner stone of the University, Weizman wanted to bridge the gap between the existing Jerusalem and the future one."⁴⁷

The idea of establishing a Jewish college or university had arisen in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Like the idea of establishing a Jewish state for the Jewish people, the idea of establish a Jewish university was mainly in response to anti-Semitism directed at Jewish students in the universities of Europe, especially in Russia. At the first Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897, Professor Herman Shapiro suggested the establishment of a Jewish university (without naming a location) as soon as possible. In general, the idea was positively received, although not a first priority.

In 1902, Weizman, Martin Buber and Berthord Feiwel published a pamphlet called *Eine Judische Hochschule (A Jewish College)*, in which they explained the need to found a Jewish institution. Their suggested locations included Palestine, England and Sweden.

Real progress first came, however, on the eve of the 11th Zionist Congress in 1911 when the establishment of a Jewish university was put on the agenda. The issue was raised on the eight day of the congress by Usishkin, and Weizman followed, saying:

*It is superfluous to discuss at length before a Zionist congress the national necessity and importance of a Jewish university. We all feel the immense value of the intelligence centre, where Jews could learn, teach, and do research in sympathetic atmosphere free from hindrances, and inspired by the resolve to create new Jewish values and bring our great traditions into harmony with the modern world. Out of such a synthesis genuine Jewish education would arise, from which the Jewish nation as a whole would profit most. The influence of such a centre on the Diaspora would be profound; the self-esteem of the Jewish intellectuals would be greatly enhanced.*⁴⁸

He used essentially the same logic as he had in his 1902 pamphlet. But this time, Jerusalem was mentioned as a suitable site. His eloquent speech, however, did not silence the debate over this matter within the Zionist movement. Reservations came from all sides—religious and secular, practical and political, and from those who lived in Palestine and those who lived outside it.

Max Nordau, for instance, a Zionist intellectual leader considered one of the founders of the Zionist movement and a member of the Small Action Committee, rejected the idea and accused Weizman and his colleagues of having squandered university funds.⁴⁹ Nordau expressed the view that the Jewish people were a decade away from being ready for such a move, citing their lack of economic and employment stability. He described middle class Jews as inferior, and at the same time he described those who were looking to higher education, as doing so as a result of Jewish weakness.⁵⁰

Ahad Haam, another leading Zionist thinker, was also not convinced by Weizman's logic. He thought the idea of establishing a Jewish university was good in principle but the timing was not right. He believed the Jewish people still lacked real internal freedom, and the establishment of a higher educational institution as a Jewish cultural centre in Europe could only reinforce the tendency of imitation and self-denial. He believed that such an institution would not be a real national institution.⁵¹

Weizman saw another reason for Ahad Haam's argument: "He considers the idea of the university dangerous in that the establishment of such a centre will arouse the suspicions of states whose eyes are turned to Jerusalem. It's true that Hebrew University and the Holy Sepulchre in one and the same place are quite incompatible, but we certainly can't give up Jerusalem."⁵²

The idea of the university also faced strong opposition from Zionist leaders and writers living in Palestine. Arthur Rupin, head of the Palestine Office, rejected the idea because he believed that such a move could adversely affect settlement activities, especially the agriculture settlements. He believed building new settlements was more important than building a university and calculated that it would be better to buy cheaper agriculture land than to purchase expensive urban land for a university.⁵³

Yosef Aharonovich, editor of the journal *Hashomer HaTsa'ir* (*The Young Guard*), claimed that the Jewish people lack material capabilities, not spirit, and that the material is the basis of the nation. He remarked sardonically that the Jewish people were not persecuted because they hadn't produced enough books or given the world enough scholars.⁵⁴

But Weizman and his colleagues had strong support from other quarters, especially from Zeev Jabotinsky, who would later become the leader of the revisionist faction and then leader of the New Zionists, and one of Weizman's stronger rivals within the

Israeli right. Jabotinsky not only supported the establishment of Hebrew University, he pushed for it to happen as soon as possible. His motivation at this stage was not political or ideological, and the location was not important; the most important thing for him was the need for an independent Jewish academic institution in light of the treatment of Jewish students, especially in Russia. He suggested starting immediately by establishing an institute that would later on be developed into a university.⁵⁵ Weizman rejected this plan and insisted on working carefully toward establishing a good university with a respected reputation. He wrote:

*They want a teaching institute straightaway because urgency exists in Russia. I stress with the greatest emphasis that this is a dangerous, deadly point of view....For us, from the national point of view, from the point of view of the conquest of the land, that part of the university to be realized in the research institute, which is, as it were, the higher, purely scientific part, is the most important part and not the teaching.*⁵⁶

The response of the religious factions could roughly be divided into two main streams, that of the *Mizrachi* movement and that of the ultra-orthodox Jews. The *Mizrachi* faction was not against the idea in principle. They had reservations about what would be taught in the university, and they wanted segregation between male and female students.⁵⁷ Rabbi Yehuda Lev Mimon, speaking at the 5th Congress of the *Mizrachi* movement held in Philadelphia in 1918, gave his view that there were more important things to do in Palestine than establish a university, and that the *Mizrahim* needed their own institution rather than a secular one.⁵⁸ Rabbi Meir Bar-Ilan, another *Mizrachi* leader, held a similar position but refused to see the university's establishment as an act of *Torah miZion* (literally: "Torah from Zion", meaning God's order).⁵⁹ Rabbi Abraham Kook thought, like Rabbi Bar-Ilan that, whether or not he was in favour of a university per se, it was more important to establish a religious centre as an alternative to the secular ones.⁶⁰ When the university finally opened, he was invited to lead a prayer at the opening ceremony.

Other ultra-orthodox groups mostly opposed the idea and later on refused to participate in the opening ceremony. In their neighbourhoods, they displayed posters condemning the event, without explaining the reasons for the boycott.⁶¹

The debate over the Hebrew University in Jerusalem reflected to a certain extent the debate within the Jewish world regarding the direction of the future of the Jewish people, and the debate over how to deal with the issue of Jerusalem. The process of establishing the university was a gradual one and ran parallel with gradual recognition of the importance of the city. The other dimension to be evaluated in this discussion is the struggle between the Jews and the Palestinians over the city. How did the different groups and factions within the Zionist movement deal with issue of Jerusalem in times of conflict and confrontation?

The 1929 Disturbances, a Turning Point

The bloody clashes of 1929 between Arabs and Jews in Palestine (the al-Buraq Revolt, as it was called by the Arabs) started in Jerusalem. In light of the clashes, in which a total of 133 Jews were killed and 339 wounded, with 116 Arabs killed and 232 wounded,⁶² a Royal Commission was appointed to investigate the causes of the violence and suggest solutions. A special committee was also appointed to find a solution to the issue of the Wailing Wall or al-Buraq Wall.

The clashes had three dimensions to them: the Arab-Jewish struggle over Palestine; the Arab-Jewish struggle over Jerusalem; and Jewish/Zionist internal debate over the Jerusalem issue. Anita Shapira claims in her book, *Land and Power*, that the first change in the Zionist approach following these clashes was that its leaders no longer thought it possible to solve their problems with the Arabs without confrontation. The concept of co-existence was pushed aside and those who pushed for extreme action prevailed. In addition, the issue of Jerusalem moved up the agenda relatively to its status before the riots.⁶³

From the Revisionist point of view—especially that of Jabotinsky—the clashes were considered evidence that ‘achieving rights by force’ was the right approach. The Revisionists used the clashes to push the Jewish *Yishuv* in Palestine to adopt their policy of establishing a Jewish army, their argument being that Jews should protect themselves and not depend on external powers. For them, Jerusalem was the best place for these events to have taken place,⁶⁴ despite that Jabotinsky was more interested in national symbols than religious heritage.⁶⁵ Jabotinsky wanted to emphasize the issue of the Wailing Wall because he thought it could revive the national spirit of the Jewish people. In June 1929, one month before the clashes, he wrote:

*Jerusalem is as yet a miserable provincial town, without cultural life, without inner cohesion, the various communities—the English, the Russians, and the Germans—are isolated from one another. The overwhelming majority among them hasn't even any interest in Vaad Leumi, everybody is discontented. A great and interesting centre has degenerated into an obscure hole. It would take a lot of shaking to wake them up.*⁶⁶

Before and after the bloody disturbances, a heated debate was ongoing on the pages of various journals regarding the issue of the Wailing Wall. The journal of the Revisionist movement, *Doar haYom (The Daily Post)* was accused by the Show Commission and most of the other journals of kindling the clashes. They told the commission that *Doar haYom* was “trying to force the hand of the Zionist Executive through articles calling for action regarding the Wailing Wall”.⁶⁷

Jabotinsky insisted in a letter to a friend that: “It was a psychological and practical necessity; and if I believed for a moment that that was the cause of the outbreak, I should heartily congratulate the promoters... It is the main thing in all strategy to force the enemy to attack before he is ready.”⁶⁸

Unlike the Revisionists and Jabotinsky, and despite the pressure from part of the Jewish street, most Zionist leaders did not believe that the time was yet right to change their approach to Jerusalem, especially to the Wailing Wall—at least not through force. They wanted to improve the Jewish position and even tried to buy the plaza of the wall (the *Kotel* in Hebrew) with the consent of the Arabs and full co-operation and coordination with the British Mandate. One of the reasons that Weizman was interested in buying the *Kotel* was his belief that this act would bring the Zionist movement closer to the Jewish world and would establish its position as the leader of the Jews in Palestine.⁶⁹ The Labour faction, on the other hand, argued that what would revive the spirit of the people was *alia* (Jewish immigration), work and the land.

I believe that one reason for the acceptance and welcome of the *Kotel* Committee by the Zionist movement, and their rather cold approach towards the Show Commission, was that while the results of the Show Commission were more or less known, the composition of the *Kotel* Committee was international and therefore held more promise for changing the status quo. Weizman, for instance, hoped that the Committee would succeed in solving the problem, because it suggested sending the rabbinate to negotiate the issue while leaving the Jewish Agency sitting on the sidelines without risk or responsibility. Meanwhile, direction was given to the representatives of the Jewish Agency on the *Kotel* Committee not to minimize or ignore the rights of the Arabs on the *Kotel*—they were just to claim the Jewish right to pray there.⁷⁰ That mirrored exactly the position of Weizman. In his letter to Oskar Wassermann, he wrote:

*As far as the question of the Kotel Ma’aravi [Western Wall] is concerned, I stand very close to your own thought; we i.e. the Executive have never demanded more than an arrangement by which the right of freedom to conduct prayers in a decent form appropriate to the dignity of our religion would be guaranteed. That is the minimum we must demand, but also, in my opinion, the maximum we should strive for.*⁷¹

Two years later, in 1931 at the Zionist Congress held in London, Ben Gurion said that history would judge those who had caused the problem. He thought it was a mistake to revive the issue of prayer at the wall.⁷² Yosef Aharonivich, the leader of *haShomair haTsair* (the Young Guard), an opposition faction to BEITAR, criticized Revisionist activities regarding the Wailing Wall and warned even before the disturbances that the provocation of the Revisionists might spark trouble. His colleague Moshe Beilinson wrote:

We must not forget that the central thing in our life is to be engaged in different values; alia (immigration), work and land. If thousands of Jews come and live in this land, working their land, the Wailing Wall will belong to us. If we haven't the people, even if they give us all of the Kotel we will not be able to protect it.⁷³

Haim Arlozorov, head of the political committee of the Zionist Movement, (who was assassinated in 1933, apparently by an extremist Jew, while walking with his wife on the beach in Jaffa), sharply criticized what he called the ill-advised attempts of the Revisionists to focus attention on the explosive issue of the Wailing Wall. He wrote:

What is all this excitement about? What good does it do? This damned entrance to the Wailing Wall is truly a cul-de-sac, which will cost us most dearly. Blood, quiet, nerves, good will, constructive ability, relations and contacts that are hard to maintain, the security of our brethren—all this will be the price we will have to pay for it?⁷⁴

On another occasion, Arlozorov continued in the same vein, describing the attempts of the Revisionists to play up the issue of the Wailing Wall as an act of provocation that was both immoral and imprudent.⁷⁵

It is clear that there were at least two different Zionist approaches regarding the issue of Jerusalem in general, and particularly the issue of the Wailing Wall. The riots of 1929 were a turning point in that they pushed the issue of Jerusalem to the top of the Zionist agenda, even if some Zionists were not convinced that this was the correct path, at least tactically. The events put the Zionist movement in a corner without a lot of options other than to take into account the trend of dealing with Jerusalem not just as a religious place, sacred to the Jewish people, but as a political, ideological and symbolic place. The riots gave yet more weight to the 'earthly Jerusalem' at the expense of the 'heavenly Jerusalem'. All attempts to set aside the issue of Jerusalem, the issue of the sacred places, until the future had failed, and this was one reason for Weizman's resignation as the leader of the Zionist movement.

In sum, the ideological nature of the Zionist movement as a secular, modern and social movement originally clashed with traditional, religious and historical Jerusalem. The majority of the Jewish community who lived in Jerusalem was ultra-orthodox and had little interest in cooperating with the Zionist leadership. In addition, Zionist leaders felt that attempts to build in Jerusalem would be met with international opposition. The establishment of the Hebrew University, however, signalled a turning point in the struggle between the traditional and the modern Jerusalem, the spiritual heavenly Jerusalem and the new secular and earthly Jerusalem. Finally, the riots of 1929 pushed Jerusalem to the top of the agenda in the conflict between the Jews and Arabs in Palestine. The gradual change of the Zionist leadership's approach towards the city

can be traced only by examining these details. Its main feature, however, was to keep a low profile towards Jerusalem in order to avoid international anger, and at the same time avoid a split within the Jewish leadership and the Jewish community.

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Endnotes

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- ² Nitza Rosovsky (ed), *City of Great Kings, Jerusalem from David to the Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) 152.
- ³ Ruth Kark & Michael Oren-Nordheim. *Jerusalem and Its Environs: Quarters, Neighborhoods, Villages-1800-1948* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2001) 320.
- ⁴ Zalman Lavontin, *To Lands of our fathers* (Tel Aviv, 1924) 23.
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- ¹⁵ H. Lavsky, *The Basic of the Zionist Budget, Zionist Commission 1918-1921* (Jerusalem, 1981) 40.
- ¹⁶ Rosovsky, 150.
- ¹⁷ Tahan letter to Wolfson, 11 Nov., 1910, CZA, Z2/652.
- ¹⁸ Tahan, letter to Rupin, CZAL1/272 Za.
- ¹⁹ Weizman, letter dated 25 April, 1918.
- ²⁰ CZA, Files No, KKL2/61, and L1/132, L2/ 16.
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- ²² Kark & Oren-Notheim, 140-151.
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- ²⁴ Ze'ev Tzahor, *Center and Periphery in Israel-History and Reality*. Unpublished article, 1-2.
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- ²⁶ Quoted in Erik Cohen, *The City in Zionist Ideology* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, Eleizer Kaplan School of Economic and Social Science, 1970) 3.
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- ³⁵ Yossi Katz, "The change in Attitude of Usishkin and the Hovevei Zion to the Development of Jerusalem and the Founding of the Hebrew University Prior to the First World War", in Hagit Lavsky (ed.), *Jerusalem in Zionist Vision and Realization*, op.cit., 108.

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- ⁴¹ Leonard Stein (ed), *The Letters and Papers of Chaim Weizman*, vol. v (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) Jan. 1907 - Feb. 1913.
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- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1 May, 1918.
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- ⁵¹ See Ahad Haam, *Letters*, n. 3, p. 136.
- ⁵² Weizman Letters, 13 March, 1913.
- ⁵³ Shaul Katz and Michael Heyd, 50.
- ⁵⁴ "The Spirit and the Material", *The Young Guard Journal*, 13 July, 1913.
- ⁵⁵ *The Hebrew University*, 66.
- ⁵⁶ Weizman Letters, vol. 6, 335-339.
- ⁵⁷ The Hebrew University, 57.
- ⁵⁸ K. Caplan, *Is This Not an Upside Down World? The Lives, Sermons and Continuity and Change in Sermons of American Orthodox Rabbis*, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Department of Jewish Thought, PhD thesis, 1996, 143.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 140.
- ⁶² Dinur B. Z., (ed.), *History of the Hagana*, 1954-72, vol. 2, 363 (Hebrew).
- ⁶³ A. Shapira, *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force 1881-1948*, (in Hebrew called *haErev haYonah* or *Sword of the Dove*, translated by William Templer (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
- ⁶⁴ In fact, the symbols of the Revisionist movement were the village of Tel Hai and Yosef Trumpeldor (The Jewish hero of the Revisionists who was killed in Tel Hai in the north of Palestine at the beginning of the 20th century). The name of BEITAR, the youth movement of the Revisionists also derived from the name of Trumpeldor and the ceremonies of BEITAR were held on the 21st of Marsh (the day that Trumpeldor was killed). Jabotinsky himself went to Tel Hai, not to Jerusalem, to celebrate national events.
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- ⁶⁶ Y. B. Schechman, *Fighter and Prophet: The Last Years of Vladimir Jabotinsky* (New York: T. Yosseloff, 1961) vol 2, 103.
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- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.
- ⁶⁹ Weizman Letters, 1 May, 1918 and 30 May, 1918.
- ⁷⁰ Yigal Eilam, 411.
- ⁷¹ Weizman Letters, 19 Sept., 1929.
- ⁷² Yigal Eilam, 412.
- ⁷³ *Ben Gurion Memories*, vol 1, 342.
- ⁷⁴ Shlomo Avineri, *Arlozorov* (London: P. Halban, 1989) 67.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.