



# Alternative Voices in Late Ottoman Palestine

## A Historical Note

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Abigail Jacobson

This paper is based on parts of my larger dissertation project, which focuses on Jerusalem in the transition period between Ottoman and Mandatory rules, between the years 1912-1920. In the course of this research, I ‘met’ several figures that intrigued me, and were the inspiration for further investigations into these individuals’ roles, positions and ‘locations’ in the historical narrative of late Ottoman Palestine. These unheard, alternative voices have never ‘made it’ to the front stage of history or the historical narrative of the Jewish-Arab conflict. This paper, then, is an attempt to “give voice” to these people, who presented an alternative view regarding the evolving national conflict of the time. By presenting these figures, I am seeking to break the nationally-based dichotomies that are so



Born in 1892 to a Tunisian family, Nissim Malul became a member of the Zionist National Committee. Source: *Encyclopedia for the Pioneers of the Yishuv*.

prevalent in today's research and debates. It is important to note that, although the people I am discussing here were connected to various institutions and collectives, I do not treat them here as 'representatives' of their institutions, but rather as individuals. This separation between 'institution' and 'individual' is important in this context.

The two first figures that I would like to discuss are Nissim Malul and Shimon Moyal, both Sephardi Jews, fluent in Arabic, journalists and writers. They were also active in the political scene and involved in questions regarding the relations between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. I first 'met' them both while reading the Sephardi newspaper *Ha-Herut*, published in Jerusalem, in which they both expressed intriguing views regarding the nationalist tension prevalent in the country in the early twentieth century.

Nissim Malul was born to a Tunisian family in 1892. At a young age he moved with his family to Egypt, where his father became a rabbi in the Jewish communities of Cairo and Tanta. He studied in Jewish schools in Cairo, and completed his higher education at the American College in Tanta, where he studied philosophy, Arabic literature and

journalism. During this period, he began publishing in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Muqattam*. In 1911, he returned to Palestine, and started working for the Zionist office in Jaffa. His main role was to respond to anti-Zionist articles that were being published in the Palestinian Christian-owned newspapers *Filastin* and *Al-Karmil*. He was fluent in Arabic, and his articles were published in other newspapers in Egypt and Lebanon as well. He was also involved in the brief publication of a Jewish newspaper in Arabic, called *Sawt al-Uthmaniyah*, the *Voice of Ottoman*, with his friend Shimon Moyal. This newspaper targeted the Arab population in Palestine in an attempt to explain the aims of the Zionist movement and convince the Arabs of its 'good intentions'. During World War I, Malul was expelled to Damascus by the Turks, who suspected him of anti-Ottoman activities. He escaped to Egypt and remained there until the end of the war. When he returned to Palestine, he established two Arabic newspapers, *Al-Akhbar* and later *Al-Salam*, both of which were funded by the Zionist movement, and preached for Jewish-Arab understanding. Between 1922-1925, he became a member of the Zionist National Committee and later participated in the Arabic workers' newspaper *Ittihad al-Ummal*.<sup>1</sup>

Shimon Moyal was born in Jaffa in 1866 to a Moroccan family and died in Jaffa in 1915. He studied medicine in Beirut and became a medical doctor. In 1894, he married Ester Moyal, a journalist and feminist. They moved to Cairo and started writing in different Egyptian newspapers, preaching for close relations between Jews and Arabs and for understanding between the 'people of the East'. In 1908 they returned to Jaffa, and in 1909, Moyal finished translating selections of the Babylonian Talmud into Arabic. In 1913, the Moyals jointly edited *Sawt al-Uthmaniyah*. In an attempt to respond to Arab attacks on Zionism in

the Palestinian Arabic press in the period preceding WWI, Shimon and Ester Moyal, together with a number of other Sephardi Jews, established in 1913 an organization called Ha-Magen (The Shield) whose goal was to reply to any article against Zionism that appeared in the Arabic press, and to translate related articles from Arabic into Hebrew. Among other things, this association declared one of its goals to be the creation of greater understanding between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, and the promotion of peaceful relations with Arabs living in the country. Moyal had many contacts with Arab nationalists, and was very active in the Free Masons society in Jaffa, as well as in the activities of the Decentralization Party in Egypt (*Al-Lamarkaziyah*).<sup>2</sup>

In my view, both Moyal and Malul present a very unique perspective towards the evolving national conflict during the years preceding World War I (and in the case of Malul, also during the British Mandate), as well as towards the unfolding nature of Arab-Jewish relations in Palestine. Being fluent in Arabic, and having lived in both Cairo and Beirut, they were deeply involved in the literature and intellectual life of the Arab world.

One may ask here, what made their perspectives ‘alternative’, given their close ties with and advancement of the Zionist establishment? In my view, what stands out in much of their literary and intellectual activity in Palestine was a belief that close ties must be developed between Jews and Arabs (especially Muslims) in the country, that Jews who did not know Arabic must be exposed to Arabs and their culture, and finally, that it was important to act as loyal Ottomans in advancing the development of Palestine. This Ottoman identification played an important role in the perceptions of these individuals, and made their voices complex, combining both Zionism and Ottomanism.

An example of Nissim Malul’s profound



*Shimon Moyal (1866 - 1915) worked to promote Zionism in the Arabic press. Source: Encyclopedia for the Pioneers of the Yishuv.*

contribution to the debate over Jewish relations with Arabs is a three-part essay published in June 1913 in *Ha-Herut*<sup>3</sup>. Malul argued that if Jews were to settle in Palestine, they must learn Arabic, the language spoken in that country. However, he extends that argument further, calling for assimilation with the ‘people of the country’, to be achieved by learning and speaking their language. According to Malul, “National consciousness is achieved by activities, not by the language spoken by the people”. This was an extremely unique view at the time, sharply contrasting with the mainstream Zionist attitude regarding the importance and centrality of Hebrew, and, for that matter, differing from *Ha-Herut*’s editorial line. The newspaper’s editor added a brief comment at the end of Malul’s essay, emphasizing his own belief that Arabic should be taught and used among the Jewish inhabitants of Palestine, but only as a secondary language.

Indeed, Moyal and Malul both viewed proficiency in Arabic among Jews in Palestine as the key to better understanding between Jews and Arabs. They emphasized the commonalities between Jews and Muslims, while viewing the Christian Arabs as inciting national tension and

hatred towards Jews and Zionists. Moyal, through Ha-Magen, engaged in political activity that was oppositional to the two Christian-owned newspapers published in Palestine at the time, all the while actively trying to expose these newspapers' readers to the 'real intentions' of the Jews, and the possibility of working together for the advancement of Palestine. One of the major themes in the articles was the opportunities for cooperation between resident Jews and Muslims. This was posited in the framework of loyalty to the Ottoman homeland, *Al-Watan*. They viewed Sephardi Jews, who know the language and culture of the Arabs and lived among them, as a bridge between Jews and Arabs and promoters of mutual understanding.

Haim Margaliyot Kalvaryski is an alternative voice of a very different kind. Born in Poland in 1867, he arrived to Palestine in 1895 as an agronomist and served for many years as the administrator of agricultural settlements in lower and upper Galilee. One of his major roles was to purchase lands from the Arabs and develop the Jewish settlements in the region. During WWI, Kalvaryski managed to use his good connections with the Turkish authorities in Palestine to help the Jewish community in the settlements and ease their difficult situation as much as possible. He managed to stay in Palestine throughout the war, and unlike other Jews and Zionist activists was not expelled by the Turks to Damascus or Egypt. After the war, he served as a member of the General Council (*Vaad Leumi*) of the Jewish community and the head of the Arab Bureau until 1928. In later years he was one of the leaders of the leftist *Brit Shalom* movement that sought to reach 'Jewish-Arab understanding' in Palestine.<sup>4</sup>

Kalvaryski's awareness of the Arab question and the national tension between Jews and Arabs began early in life. What caught my attention about him were comments he made

in a discussion on Jewish-Arab relations that took place at a meeting of the Jewish Va'ad Ha-Tzirim (The Zionist Commission) in 1919. In this meeting, Kalvaryski described the evolution of his thinking: awareness towards the Arab question.

I realized how serious the issue of our relations with the Arabs is when I first purchased lands from the Arabs (In the Galilee)... I realized how close the Bedouin is to his land... During my 25 years of colonial work I have dispossessed ("nishlti") many Arabs from their lands, and you understand that this job - of dispossessing people from the land in which they and maybe their father were born - is not at all an easy thing, especially when one looks at these people as human beings... I had to do this, because this is what the Yishuv asked for, but I always tried to do it in the best way possible... I got familiar with the Arabs and the Arab question very early on."<sup>5</sup>

When I first read this quote, what came to my mind was the common phrase "*Yorim ve-Bochim*" (in Hebrew, "shooting and crying"). Kalvaryski confesses to dispossessing Arabs from their lands, but does this realization make him act in a different way? He does not quit his job in the Zionist movement. Still, Kalvaryski's words express a kind of a dissonance towards his work and duties. Perhaps this dissonance was what made him active in various attempts to reach an agreement between Jews and Arabs.

In 1910, following the development of the Arab national movement in the Ottoman Empire, Kalvaryski began to see the connection between the Jewish movement in Palestine and national awareness among the Arabs. In 1913, according to his own words, he "came to the realization that we should reach some kind of a *modus vivendi* with the Arabs". He began developing close connections with Arab leaders, and discussed with them ways of creating a 'Jewish-Arab

understanding'. He tried to stimulate such a discussion with some Zionist leaders, among them Nahum Sokolov, and in 1914 he managed to arrange a meeting with Jewish and Arab leaders in Lebanon to discuss possible ways of reaching a Jewish-Arab understanding and agreement. This meeting was cancelled at the very last minute. According to Kalvaryski, "the meeting was cancelled because of many reasons, but mainly because the Jews did not understand its importance, and treated the Arab national movement flippantly, or ignored it altogether."<sup>6</sup>

Another attempt of Kalvaryski to reach an agreement between Arab and Jewish leaders was in 1919, when he discussed the national issue with King Faisal, who asked him to prepare a draft for an agreement between Jews and Arabs. Kalvaryski prepared such a draft, which stated, among other things, that Palestine would remain the national home of the Jewish people, and allowed for free Jewish immigration to Palestine. Interestingly, Kalvaryski also noted in the draft that the Jewish national home must not be based on the ruin of others, and hence he claimed that thinking about the country's future must take into account the Arabs. This proposal failed due to lack of agreement within the Zionist movement.

Kalvaryski was a very problematic figure, and there are many conclusions one might make regarding his motivations and the Arabs with whom he negotiated. Most probably, he was bribing some of the Arabs he was in touch with.<sup>7</sup> After the war, he was also involved in supporting the Muslim National Associations, which acted against the national Christian-Muslim Associations, an involvement that makes him suspect of attempts to 'divide and rule.'<sup>8</sup> Despite all of this, I believe that in the Zionist paradigms of the time, his is another 'outsider' voice to examine. Like Malul and Moyal, he, too,

was very critical of the Zionist movement, even though he was part of it, and argued that it missed an opportunity to negotiate with Arab leaders, recognize the Arab national movement and acknowledge its future influence. He charged the Zionist movement with ignoring the Arabs who lived in Palestine, and accused it of wrongly negotiating with the Turkish imperial power, rather than the indigenous Palestinian population.

The last figure I want to discuss here is Hussein Salim al-Husseini. I was first 'introduced' to Hussein al-Husseini while reading the Hebrew Sephardi newspaper *Ha-Herut*. Reviewing articles on the 1914 mayoral elections, what struck me were the very favourable descriptions of the mayor of the city, Hussein al-Husseini, by the newspaper's contributors (see below). As a member of one of the most prominent Palestinian families and, unlike other members of this family, Hussein has not garnered much attention in literature or scholarship. That made me very curious to learn more about him, and about the role he played in late Ottoman Jerusalem.

Hussein Salim al-Husseini was the son of Salim al-Husseini, who served as the mayor of Jerusalem in the beginning of the twentieth century, and the brother of Musa Kazim al-Husseini, who was later to play an important role in the Palestinian leadership during the Mandate, serving as the president of the Arab Executive. Hussein served as the last mayor of Jerusalem between 1910 and 1917. In the famous picture of surrender of Jerusalem to the British forces in December 1917, al-Husseini, as the mayor of the city, is seen holding a white flag and handing over the city's surrender pact. He passed away a few weeks after the British entered Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup>

Around the period of the Young Turks revolution in 1908, according to some

reports from the British Consul in Jerusalem, Hussein al-Husseini expressed some criticism towards the new regime in the Ottoman Empire, and was among the Arab notables to discuss the possibilities of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of a new state in its Arab provinces.<sup>10</sup> This is particularly interesting coming from the son of Salim al-Husseini, who was a loyal Ottomanist and served as a member of the Ottoman Administrative Council (*Majlis Idara*). According to Jawhariyeh's memoir, Hussein paid a price for his Arab nationalistic views, and was fired in 1915 from the mayorship by the Turks. I was unable, however, to find any indication of this in any other source.<sup>11</sup>

In relation to the Zionist movement, 'Adil Manna in his entry on Hussein mentions an article published in March 1914 in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Iqdam*, in which al-Husseini is quoted saying that the Zionist movement is not a political movement and does not endanger Palestine. The real risk, he said, was from the settlers' movement (*Harikat al-Istitan*), and hence it was necessary, he argued, to prevent land sales to Jews.<sup>12</sup> This is a very interesting distinction and a strange way of seeing the Zionist movement, as non-political in essence. Does it mean that al-Husseini was not aware, or ignorant, of the debates regarding Zionism and land sales during this period?<sup>13</sup> Not necessarily, I would argue. I think that the basis for this statement was perhaps something else, namely his tendencies towards real politique as a mayor with a constituency that included many Jews.

Indeed, it seems that Hussein Effendi al-Husseini was highly respected by many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and was perceived as a man who cared greatly for the city and its residents. His father, Salim Effendi, had a reputation for walking the streets of Jerusalem to make sure that they

were clean.<sup>14</sup> During Salim's tenure in office, the Turks started paving roads in the city. Al-Husseini himself seemed to be highly appreciated by all Jerusalemites, Muslims, Christian and Jews alike. For example, in an article in the Jewish newspaper *Ha-Herut* from 11 January, 1914, the writer expresses his hope that al-Husseini would be re-elected as the mayor of Jerusalem. He posits:

*Al-Husseini is a wise, humble and progressive man, and a lover of Israel [the Jewish people]. During his reign as mayor, he tried to make many reforms and changes in the Jerusalem municipality. Thanks to his and his notable friends' energies, we gained light and clean streets, and our city took a different shape. If al-Husseini stays as a mayor there is no doubt that he will continue working for the development and progress of the city.*<sup>15</sup>

In these elections no Jewish representative was elected for the city council. The editor of *Ha-Herut* expressed his great regret and disappointment about that, but mentioned that "the only beam of light (in this election) is the fact that Hussein al-Husseini was re-elected."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, al-Husseini won the support of many Jerusalemite Jews. Specifically, the Society of Ottoman Jews, composed mainly of Sephardi Jews, was very supportive of him. Another indication of al-Husseini's dedication to the well-being of the residents of Jerusalem was his war-time trip with Roshen Bey, the Ottoman military governor of Jerusalem, to al-Salt in Jordan in order to import some wheat for the starving residents of Jerusalem.<sup>17</sup>

Hussein al-Husseini was involved in different projects that brought together Jews, Muslims and Christians in the city. One of these projects was the Red Crescent Society, established in 1915, of which al-Husseini served as director. His deputy was Albert

Antebi, a prominent Jew who also established the Alliance school in Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup> Another joint project is described as taking place in December 1915, in the midst of Djemal Pasha's persecutions of Arab nationalists. At this time, members of the Hussein family (Muhammad Salah, Fakhri) and others met with Eliezer Ben Yehuda, David Yellin, Albert Antebi, Yakov Tahon and some other prominent Jews to discuss advancing Jewish-Arab understanding. Hussein al-Husseini could not attend the meeting, but sent a letter praising the meeting and its participants. He saw in this assembly an attempt to discuss the possibilities for a joint homeland.<sup>19</sup>

I view al-Husseini as an intriguing figure, worthy of further exploration. He combines a dedication to the city of Jerusalem as an urban locale, and to its residents of all religious beliefs. He cooperated with Jews and Christians in an attempt to create a 'post-Ottoman' alternative, and also worked together with some Turkish officers during the war. In a period that witnessed a fracturing of society along nationalist lines, I view al-Husseini as a bridge between the local communities of Jerusalem, and as some kind of 'local patriot'.

These four figures that I encountered in my broader research were each involved in larger collectives and institutions: Malul and Moyal as Sephardi Zionists/Ottomanists; Kalvaryski as a figure with dubious motives, an Ashkenazi Jew who worked for the Zionist movement; and al-Husseini who came from one of the most prominent Muslim families and played a central role in Jerusalem among the city's co-religionists in the late Ottoman period. The line connecting these figures is traced between the different, alternative, views they expressed during this time of nationalist tension, and in their vision of future life in Palestine. Their attitudes towards the Ottoman Empire are also interesting, with Moyal and Malul

positioning as Ottoman patriots, and al-Husseini as the Arab nationalist, or perhaps as a pragmatic politician.

These encounters raise the following questions: What is the difference in perspective between institutions and individuals? Is it worth discussing individuals or small groups who did not necessarily influence the discourse or the reality of their time? Another important issue is the question of dissonance, in this case of people who worked with the Zionist movement, but also criticized it. What is, if any, the importance of highlighting this dissonance and the role that it played? Regarding al-Husseini: Why has he not been discussed in the literature? Was it because he tried to break the dichotomies, to bridge between communities? Was it because he was a local and not a national leader?

It is important, of course, not to romanticize these people and give them roles that they did not play. However, I see their voices as attempts to break the strict national-based dichotomies of the period, and I use them here in an attempt to 'complicate' previous assumptions and portray a more dynamic and rich depiction of life in Jerusalem, and Palestine, in the late Ottoman period.

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*Abigail Jacobson is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of History at the University of Chicago. She is currently undertaking research for her dissertation, entitled: "From Empire to Empire: Continuity and Change in Jerusalem in the Transition between Ottoman and British Rules".*

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> David Tidhar, *Encyclopedia of the Pioneers of the Yishuv and its Founders*, Vol.2 (Tel Aviv, Rishonim Library: 1958) 696-696 (Hebrew).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Vol. 3, 1219. Also see on Shimon Moyal: Yehoshua Ben Hanania, "Dr. Shimon Moyal and the Jewish-Arab Problem," in Hed ha-Mizrach, Vol. 3, (10

October, 1944): 25 (Hebrew). On Ester Moyal see: Yehoshua Ben Hanania, "The Writer Ester Moyal and Her Time," in: *Hed ha-Mizrach*, Vol. 3, (17 September, 1944): 17-18 (Hebrew). The writer of these two articles is actually Y'akov Yehoshua, who wrote extensively about Sephardi life in Jerusalem and the Palestinian Arabic press.

<sup>3</sup> "Our Situation in the Country", *Ha-Herut*, Vol. 221-223 (17-19 June, 1913) (Hebrew).

<sup>4</sup> Tidhar, *Encyclopedia* (Vol. 2) 801-802.

<sup>5</sup> Presentation of Haim Kalvaryski entitled: "Relation with the Arab Neighbors", Central Zionist Archive (CZA) J1/8777.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, and CZA A113/1

<sup>7</sup> Hillel Cohen has recently published a book that focuses on Arabs who collaborated with the Zionist movement during the Mandate. Kalvaryski's role and relations with Arab leaders is discussed there in length as well. See: Hillel Cohen, *An Army of Shadows: Palestinian Collaborators in the Service of Zion* (Jerusalem, Ivrit - Hebrew Publishing House: 2004) (Hebrew).

<sup>8</sup> See his views regarding the Christian-Muslim Associations in CZA, S25/10295.

<sup>9</sup> See Hussein Salim al-Hussein in: Salim Tamari and Issam Nassar, Eds., *al-Quds al-Uthmaniyeh fi al-Mudhakarat al-Jawhariyah* (Jerusalem, Institute of Palestine Studies: 2003); Ilan Pappé, *Aristocracy of the Land: The Husayni Family, Political Biography* (Jerusalem, Bialik Institute: 2002); 'Adil Manna, *I'alam Filastin fi Awakhir al-'Ahd al-Uthmani 1800-1918* (Jerusalem, Jamiyat al-Dirasat al-Arabiya: 1983).

<sup>10</sup> Pappé, *Aristocracy of the Land*, 161.

<sup>11</sup> Tamari and Nassar, *al-Quds al-Uthmaniyeh*, 198.

<sup>12</sup> Manna, *I'alam Filastin*, 105.

<sup>13</sup> It is worth mentioning here that the Husseini family was among the Arab elite families who was involved in land sales for the Zionist movement. See more on this in Pappé, *Aristocracy of the Land*, 168 and more.

<sup>14</sup> See Tamari and Nassar, *Al-Quds al-Uthmaniyeh*, 24-25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ha-Herut*, (11 January, 1914) 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ha-Herut*, (12 May, 1914).

<sup>17</sup> Tamari and Nassar, *al-Quds al-Uthmaniyeh*, 201-203.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 200. See also in *Ha-Herut* (8 September, 1915).

<sup>19</sup> See on this in Pappé, *Aristocracy of the Land*, 180-182.