

*Benny Morris*

## **The New Historiography** Israel Confronts Its Past

On 11 July 1948, the Yiftah Brigade's Third Battalion, as part of what was called Operation Dani, occupied the center of the Arab town of Lydda. There was no formal surrender, but the night passed quietly. Just before noon the following day, two or three armored cars belonging to the Arab Legion, the British-led and -trained Jordanian army, drove into town. A firefight ensued. And the scout cars withdrew. But a number of armed townspeople, perhaps believing that the shooting heralded a major Arab counterattack, began sniping from windows and rooftops at their Israeli occupiers. The Third Battalion—about four hundred nervous Israeli soldiers in the middle of an Arab town of tens of thousands—fiercely put down what various chroniclers subsequently called a “rebellion” by firing in the streets, into houses, and at a concentration of prisoners of war (POWs) in a mosque. Israeli military records refer to “about 250” Arabs killed in the town that afternoon.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, Israeli casualties in both the firefights with the scout cars and the suppression of the sniping were between 2 and 4 dead (the records vary) and 12 wounded. Israeli historians called the affair a rebellion in order to justify the subsequent slaughter; Arab chroniclers, such as Arif al-Arif, did likewise in order to highlight Palestinian resolve and resistance in face of Zionist encroachment.

Operation Dani took place roughly midway through the first Arab-Israeli War—the War of Independence in official Israeli parlance. The Arab states' invasion of the fledgling state on 15 May had been halted weeks before; the newly organized and freshly equipped Israel Defense Forces (IDF) were on the offensive on all fronts—as was to remain true for the remainder of the war.

On 12 July, before the shooting in Lydda had completely died down, Lt. Col. Yitzhak Rabin, the operation's officer of Operation Dani, issued the following order: “1. The inhabitants of Lydda must be expelled quickly without attention to age. They should be directed toward Beit

Nabala. Yiftah [Brigade headquarters (HQ)] must determine the method and inform [Operation] Dani HQ and Eighth Brigade HQ. 2. Implement immediately.”<sup>2</sup> A similar order was issued at the same time to the Kiryati Brigade concerning the inhabitants of the neighboring Arab town of Ramle.

On 12 and 13 July, the Yiftah and Kiryati brigades carried out their orders, expelling the fifty to sixty thousand inhabitants of the two towns, which lie about ten miles southeast of Tel Aviv. Throughout the war, the two towns had interdicted Jewish traffic on the main Tel Aviv–Jerusalem road, and the Yishuv’s leaders regarded Lydda and Ramle as a perpetual threat to Tel Aviv itself. About noon on 13 July, Operation Dani HQ informed IDF General Staff/Operations: “Lydda police fort has been captured. [The troops] are busy expelling the inhabitants [*oskim begeirush hatoshavim*].”<sup>3</sup> Lydda’s inhabitants were forced to walk eastward toward the Arab Legion lines, and many of Ramle’s inhabitants were ferried in trucks or buses. Clogging the roads (and the legion’s routes of advance westward), the tens of thousands of refugees marched, gradually shedding possessions along the way. Arab chroniclers, such as Sheikh Muhammad Nimr al Khatib, claimed that hundreds of children died in the march of dehydration and disease.<sup>4</sup> One Israeli witness at the time described the spoor. The refugee column “to begin with [jettisoned] utensils and furniture and, in the end, bodies of men, women and children.”<sup>5</sup> Many of the refugees came to rest near Ramallah and set up tent encampments (which later became refugee camps supported by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees [UNRWA] and hotbeds of Palestinian militancy).

Israeli historians in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were less than honest in their treatment of the Lydda–Ramle episode. The IDF’s official *Toldot Mu’hemet Hakomemiyut* (History of the War of Independence), written by members of the General Staff/History Branch and published in 1959, stated: “The Arabs [of Lydda], who had violated the terms of the surrender and feared [Israeli] retribution, were happy at the possibility given them of evacuating the town and proceeding eastwards, to Legion territory: Lydda emptied of its Arab inhabitants.”<sup>6</sup>

Two years later, the former head of the IDF History Branch, Lt. Col. Netanel Lorch, wrote in *The Edge of the Sword*, his history of the war, that “the residents, who had violated surrender terms and feared retribution, declared they would leave, and asked for safe conduct to Arab Legion lines, which was granted.”<sup>7</sup>

A somewhat less deceitful, but also misleading, description of the

events in Lydda and Ramle is provided by Lt. Col. Elhannan Orren, another former employee of the IDF History Branch, in his *Baderekh el Ha'ir* (On the Road to the City), a highly detailed description of Operation Dani published by the IDF Press in 1976. Orren, like his predecessors, fails to state anywhere that what occurred was an expulsion and one explicitly ordered from on high (originating, according to Ben-Gurion's first major biographer, Michael Bar-Zohar, with the prime minister himself).<sup>8</sup> Orren also repeats a variant of the 'inhabitants asked, the IDF graciously complied' story.<sup>9</sup>

Yitzhak Rabin, ironically more frank than his chroniclers, inserted a passage in the manuscript of his autobiography, *Pinkas Sherut* (service notebook), that more or less admitted that what had occurred in Lydda and Ramle had been an expulsion. But the passage was excised by order of the Israeli government. (Subsequently, to everyone's embarrassment, Peretz Kidron, the English translator of *Pinkas Sherut*, sent the deleted passage to the *New York Times*, where it was published on 23 October 1979.)<sup>10</sup>

The treatment of the Lydda-Ramle affair by past Israeli historians is illustrative of what can be called, for want of a better term, the Old or official History. That history has shaped the way Israelis and diaspora Jews—or at least diaspora Zionists—have seen, and in large measure still see, Israel's past; and it has also held sway over the way gentile Europeans and Americans (and their governments) see that past. This understanding of the past, in turn, has significantly influenced the attitude of diaspora Jews, as well as European and American non-Jews, toward present-day Israel—which effects government policies concerning the Israeli-Arab conflict.

The essence of the Old History is that Zionism was a beneficent and well-meaning, progressive national movement; that Israel was born pure into an uncharitable, predatory world; that Zionist efforts to achieve compromise and conciliation were rejected by the Arabs; and that Palestine's Arabs, and in their wake the surrounding Arab states, for reasons of innate selfishness, xenophobia, and downright cussedness, refused to accede to the burgeoning Zionist presence and in 1947 launched a war to extirpate the foreign plant. The Arabs, so goes the Old History, were politically and militarily assisted in their efforts by the British, but they nonetheless lost the war. Poorly armed and outnumbered, the Jewish community in Palestine, called the Yishuv, fought valiantly, suppressed the Palestinian "gangs" (*knufiyot* in Israeli parlance), and repelled the "five" invading Arab armies. In the course of that war, says the Old History—which at this point becomes indistinguishable from Israeli propaganda—Arab states and leaders, in order to blacken Israel's image and facilitate the

invasion of Palestine, called on or ordered Palestine's Arabs to quit their homes and the "Zionist areas"—to which they were expected to return once the Arab armies had proved victorious. Thus was triggered the Palestinian Arab exodus, which led to the now forty-year-old Palestinian refugee problem.

The Old History makes the further claim that in the latter stages of the 1948 war and in the years immediately thereafter Israel desperately sought to make peace with all or any of its neighbors. But the Arabs, obdurate and ungenerous, refused all overtures, remaining hell-bent on destroying Israel.

The Old Historians offered a simplistic and consciously pro-Israeli interpretation of the past, and they deliberately avoided mentioning anything that would reflect badly on Israel. People argued that since the conflict with the Arabs was still raging, and since it was a political as well as a military struggle, it necessarily involved propaganda, the goodwill (or ill will) of governments in the West, and the hearts and minds of Christians and diaspora Jews. Blackening Israel's image, it was argued, would ultimately weaken Israel in its ongoing war for survival. In short, *raison d'état* often took precedence over telling the truth.

The past few years have witnessed the emergence of a new generation of Israeli scholars and a New History. These historians, some of them living abroad, have looked and are looking afresh at the Israeli historical experience, and their conclusions, by and large, are at odds with those of the Old Historians.

Two factors are involved in the emergence of this New History—one relating to materials, the other to personae.

Thanks to Israel's Archives Law (passed in 1955 and amended in 1964 and 1981), and particularly to its key "thirty-year rule," starting in the early 1980s a large number (hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions) of state papers were opened to researchers. Almost all the Foreign Ministry's papers from 1947 to 1956, as well as a large number of documents—correspondence, memoranda, minutes—from other ministries, including the Prime Minister's Office (though excluding the Defense Ministry and the IDF), have been released. Similarly large collections of private papers and political party papers from this period have been opened. Therefore, for the first time historians have been able to write studies of the period on the basis of a large collection of contemporary source material. (The Old History was written largely on the basis of interviews and memoirs, and at best it made use of select batches of documents, many of them censored, such as those from the IDF Archive).

The second factor is the nature of the New Historians. Most of them were born around 1948 and have matured in a more open, doubting, and self-critical Israel than the pre-Lebanon War Israel in which the Old Historians grew up. The Old Historians lived through 1948 as highly committed adult participants in the epic, glorious rebirth of the Jewish commonwealth. They were unable to separate their lives from this historical event, unable to regard impartially and objectively the facts and processes that they later wrote about. Indeed, they admit as much. The New Historians, by contrast, are able to be more impartial.

Inevitably, the New Historians focused their attention, at least initially, on 1948 both because the documents were available and because that was the central, natal, revolutionary event in Israeli history. How one perceives 1948 bears heavily on how one perceives the whole Zionist/Israeli experience. If Israel, the haven of a much-persecuted people, was born pure and innocent, then it was worthy of the grace, material assistance, and political support showered upon it by the West over the past forty years—and worthy of more of the same in the years to come. If, on the other hand, Israel was born tarnished, besmirched by original sin, then it was no more deserving of that grace and assistance than were its neighbors.

The past few months have seen the publication in the West of a handful of New Histories, including Avi Shlaim's *Collusion across the Jordan* (1988); Ilan Pappé's *Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1948–1951* (1988); Simha Flapan's *The Birth of Israel* (1987); and my own *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (1988). Taken together, these works—along with a large number of articles that have appeared recently in academic journals such as *Studies in Zionism*, *Middle Eastern Studies*, and the *Middle East Journal*—significantly undermine, if not thoroughly demolish, a variety of assumptions that helped form the core of the Old History.

Flapan's work is the least historical of these books. Indeed, it is not, strictly speaking, a history at all but rather a polemical work written from a Marxist perspective. In his introduction, Flapan—who passed away last year and was the former director of the left-wing Mapam Party's Arab Department and editor of the monthly *New Outlook*—writes that his purpose is not to produce “a detailed historical study interesting only to historians and researchers” but rather to write “a book that will undermine the propaganda structures that have so long obstructed the growth of the peace forces in my country.”<sup>11</sup> Politics rather than historiography is the book's manifest objective.

Despite its explicitly polemical purpose, Flapan's book has the virtue of more or less accurately formulating some of the central fallacies—which he calls myths—that informed the Old History. These were (1) that the Yishuv in 1947 joyously accepted partition and the truncated Jewish state prescribed by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly and that the Palestinians and the surrounding Arab states unanimously rejected the partition and attacked the Yishuv with the aim of throwing the Jews into the sea; (2) that the war was waged between a relatively defenseless and weak (Jewish) David and a relatively strong (Arab) Goliath; (3) that the Palestinians fled their homes and villages either voluntarily or at the behest or order of Arab leaders; and (4) that at the war's end Israel was interested in making peace but the recalcitrant Arabs displayed no such interest, opting for a perpetual—if sporadic—war to the finish.

Because of poor research and analysis—including the selective and erroneous use of documents—Flapan's demolition of these myths is far from convincing. But Shlaim, in *Collusion*, tackles some of the same myths—and far more persuasively. According to Shlaim, the original Zionist goal was the establishment of a Jewish state in the whole of Palestine. The acceptance of partition in the mid-1930s, as in 1947, was tactical, not a change in the Zionist dream. Ben-Gurion, says Shlaim, considered the partition lines of “secondary importance . . . because he intended to change them in any case; they were not the end but only the beginning.”<sup>12</sup> To his son, Amos, Ben-Gurion wrote in October 1937: “My assumption is that . . . a partial Jewish state is not an end but a beginning . . . and it will serve as a powerful lever in our historical efforts to redeem the whole of the country.”<sup>13</sup> In June 1938, Ben-Gurion explained to the Jewish Agency Executive that he had agreed to the partition plan “not because I will make do with part of the country, but on the basis of the assumption that after we constitute a strong force after the establishment of the state we will annul the partition and expand through the whole Land of Israel.”<sup>14</sup>

Come November 1947, the Yishuv entered the first stage of the war with a tacit understanding with Transjordan's king, Abdullah, “a falcon trapped in a canary's cage,”<sup>15</sup> that his Arab Legion would take over the eastern part of Palestine (now called the West Bank), which had been earmarked by the UN for Palestinian statehood, and would leave the Yishuv alone to set up a Jewish state in the rest of the country. The Yishuv and the Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan, Shlaim persuasively argues, had conspired from 1946 to early 1947 to nip the (future) UN Partition Resolution in the bud and to stymie the emergence of a Palestinian Arab

state. From the start, while publicly expressing support for the partition of the land between its Jewish and Arab communities, both Ben-Gurion and Abdullah aimed to frustrate the UN resolution and share among themselves the areas earmarked for Palestinian Arab statehood. It was to be partition—but between Israel and Transjordan. This “collusion” and “unholy alliance”—in Shlaim’s loaded phrases—was sealed at a now-famous clandestine meeting between Golda Myerson (Meir) and Abdullah at Naharayim, on the Jordan River, on 17 November 1947.<sup>16</sup>

This Zionist-Hashemite nonaggression pact was sanctioned by Britain, adds Shlaim. Contrary to the old Zionist historiography—which was based largely on the (mistaken) feeling of Israel’s leaders at the time—Britain’s foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, “by February 1948,” had clearly become “resigned to the inevitable emergence of a Jewish state” (while opposing the emergence of a Palestinian Arab state). Indeed, he warned Transjordan “to refrain from invading the areas allotted to the Jews.”<sup>17</sup>

Both Shlaim and Flapan make the point that the Palestinian Arabs, though led by Haj Amin al Husseini, the conniving, extremist, former mufti of Jerusalem, were far from unanimous in supporting the Husseini-led crusade against the Jews. Indeed, in the first months of the hostilities, according to Yishuv intelligence sources, the bulk of Palestine’s Arabs merely wanted quiet, if only out of respect for the Jews’ martial prowess. But gradually, in part due to Haganah overreactions, the conflict widened and eventually engulfed the two communities throughout the land. In April and May 1948, the Haganah gained the upper hand and the Palestinians lost the war, most of them suffering displacement.

What ensued, once Israel declared independence on 14 May 1948 and the Arab states invaded on 15 May, was “a general land grab,” with everyone—Israel, Transjordan, Syria, Iraq, and Egypt—bent on preventing the birth of a Palestinian Arab state and carving out chunks of Palestine for themselves.

Contrary to the Old History, Abdullah’s invasion of eastern Palestine was clearly designed to conquer territory for his kingdom—at the expense of the Palestinian Arabs—rather than to destroy the Jewish state. Indeed, the Arab Legion—apart from one abortive incursion around Notre Dame in Jerusalem and an assault on the Etzion Bloc (a Jewish settlement bloc inside the Arab state area south of Bethlehem)—struck meticulously, throughout the war, to its nonaggressive stance vis-à-vis the Yishuv and the Jewish state’s territory. Rather, it was the Haganah/IDF that repeatedly attacked the legion on territory earmarked for Arab sovereignty (at Latrun, Lydda, and Ramle).

Nevertheless, Shlaim, like Pappé in *Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, is never completely clear about the main purpose of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq in invading Palestine. Was their primary aim to overrun the Yishuv and destroy the Jewish state or was it merely to frustrate or curtail Abdullah's territorial ambitions and acquire some territory for themselves?

Flapan argues firmly, but without evidence, that "the invasion . . . was not aimed at destroying the Jewish state."<sup>18</sup> Shlaim and Pappé are more cautious. Shlaim writes that the Arab armies intended to bisect the Jewish state and if possible "occupy Haifa and Tel Aviv" or "crippl[e] the Jewish state."<sup>19</sup> But at the same time he argues that they were driven to invade more by a desire to stymie Abdullah than by a wish to kill the Jews, and, partly for this reason, they did not properly plan the invasion, either militarily or politically, and their leaders were generally pessimistic about its outcome. Pappé points out that Egypt initially did not seem determined to participate in the invasion and all the Arab states failed to commit the full weight of their military power to the enterprise,<sup>20</sup> which indicates, perhaps, that they took the declared aim of driving the Jews into the sea less than seriously. In any event, Transjordan frustrated the other Arabs' intentions throughout and rendered their military preparations and planning ineffective.<sup>21</sup>

One of the most tenacious myths relating to 1948 is that of "David and Goliath"—that the Arabs were overwhelmingly stronger militarily than the Yishuv. The simple truth—as conveyed by Flapan, Shlaim, Pappé, and myself—is that the stronger side won. The map showing a minuscule Israel and a giant surrounding sea of Arab states did not, and, indeed, for the time being still does not, accurately reflect the military balance of power. The pre-1948 Yishuv had organized itself for statehood and war; the Palestinian Arabs, who outnumbered the Jews two to one, had not. And in war command and control are everything, or almost everything. During the first half of the war (November 1947 to mid-May 1948), the Yishuv was better armed and had more trained manpower than did the Palestinians, whose forces were beefed up by several thousand volunteers from the surrounding Arab states. This superior organization, command, and control meant that at almost every decisive point of engagement the Haganah managed to field more and better-equipped formations than did the Palestinians. When the Yishuv put matters to the test, in the Haganah offensives of April and early May 1948, the decision was never in doubt; the Arab redoubts fell, in domino fashion, like ripe plums—the Jerusalem Corridor, Tiberias, Haifa, Eastern Galilee, Safad. When one adds to this the Yishuv's superiority in



morale and motivation—it was a bare three years after the Holocaust, and the Haganah troopers knew it was do-or-die—the Palestinians never had a chance.

The Old History is no more illuminating when it comes to the second stage of the war—the conventional battles of 15 May 1948 to January 1949. Jewish organization, command, and control remained superior to those of the uncoordinated armies of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, and throughout the Yishuv also had an edge in numbers. In mid-May, for example, the Haganah fielded thirty-five thousand troops while the Arab invaders fielded twenty-five to thirty thousand. By the time of Operation Dani in July, the IDF had sixty-five thousand men under arms, and by December it had eighty to ninety thousand—outnumbering its combined Arab foes at every stage of the battle. The Haganah/IDF also enjoyed the immensely important advantage, throughout the conventional war, of short lines of communication, while the Iraqis and Egyptians had to send supplies and reinforcements over hundreds of kilometers of desert before they reached the front lines.

Two caveats must be noted. First, Transjordan's Arab Legion was probably the best army in the war. But it never numbered more than nine thousand troops, and it had no tanks or aircraft. Second, in terms of equipment, during the crucial weeks between the pan-Arab invasion on 15 May and the First Truce on 11 June, the Arab armies had a major edge in weaponry over the Haganah/IDF. (The Haganah changed its name and became the IDF on 1 June 1948.) The Haganah/IDF was much weaker in terms of aircraft and had almost no artillery (only heavy mortars) and very few tanks or tracked vehicles. During those weeks, as the Haganah's officer in command of operations, Yigael Yadin, told the political leadership, the chances were about even.<sup>22</sup> But before 15 May and from the end of the First Truce onward, the Yishuv's military formations were superior both in terms of manpower and, gradually, in terms of weaponry.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from the birth of the State of Israel, the major political outcome of the 1948 war was the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem. How the problem came about has been the subject of heated controversy between Israeli and Arab propagandists for the past four decades. The controversy is as much about the nature of Zionism as it is about exactly what happened in 1948. If the Arab contention is true—that the Yishuv had always intended “transfer” and in 1948 systematically and forcibly expelled the Arab population from the areas that became the Jewish state—then Israel is a robber state that, like young Jacob, has won

the sympathy and support of its elders in the West by trickery and connivance and the Palestinians are more or less innocent victims. If, on the other hand, the Israeli propaganda line is accepted—that the Palestinians fled “voluntarily” or at the behest of their own or other Arab leaders—then Israel is free of original sin.

As I have set out in great detail in *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* the truth lies somewhere in between these two explanations. While from the mid-1930s on most of the Yishuv’s leaders, including Ben-Gurion, wanted to establish a Jewish state without an Arab minority, or with as small an Arab minority as possible, and supported a “transfer solution” to this minority problem, the Yishuv did not enter the 1948 war with a master plan for expelling the Arabs, nor did its political and military leaders ever adopt such a plan. There were Haganah/IDF expulsions of Arab communities, some of them with Haganah/IDF General Staff and/or Cabinet sanction—such as at Miska and Dumeira in April 1948; at Zarnuqa, at Qubeiba, and Huj in May; in Lydda and Ramle in July; and along the Lebanese border (in Bir‘im, Iqrit, Tarbikha, Suruh, al Mansura, and Nabi Rubin) in November. But there was no blanket or grand policy of expulsion.

On the other hand, at no point during the war did Arab leaders issue a blanket call for Palestine’s Arabs to leave their homes and villages and wander into exile. Nor was there an Arab radio or press campaign urging or ordering the Palestinians to flee. Indeed, I have found no trace of any such broadcasts—and throughout the war the Arab radio stations and press were monitored by the Israeli intelligence services and Foreign Ministry and by Western diplomatic stations and agencies (such as the BBC). No contemporary reference to or citation from such a broadcast, let alone from a series of such broadcasts, has ever surfaced.

Indeed, in early May 1948, when, according to Israeli propaganda and some of the Old Histories, such a campaign of broadcasts should have been at its height in preparation for the pan-Arab invasion, Arab radio stations and leaders (Radio Ramallah, King Abdullah, and Arab Liberation Army commander Fawzi al-Qawuqji) all issued broadcasts calling on the Palestinians to stay put and, if already in exile, to return to their homes in Palestine. References to these broadcasts exist in Haganah, Mapam, and British records.

Occasionally, local Arab commanders, leaders, and officials ordered the evacuation of women and children from war zones. Less frequently, as in Haifa on 22 April 1948, local Arab leaders advised or instructed their communities to leave rather than stay in a potential or actual war

zone or “treacherously” remain under Jewish rule. But there were no blanket Arab orders or campaigns urging people to leave.

Rather, in order to understand the exodus of the 600,000 to 760,000 Arabs from the areas that became the post-1948 Jewish state, one must look to a variety of related processes and causes. What happened in Haifa is illustrative of the complexity of the exodus (though it, too, does not convey the full complexity of what transpired in the various regions of Palestine in the course of the war).

The exodus from Haifa (which before the war had a population of about sixty-five thousand Arabs and seventy thousand Jews), as from the other main Palestinian Arab centers, Jaffa and Jerusalem, began in December 1947 with the start of hostilities between Jewish and Arab neighborhoods. The exodus gained momentum during the following months as the British Mandate administration moved toward dissolution and final withdrawal. The first to go were the rich and educated—the middle classes with second homes on the Beirut beachfront, in Nablus or Amman, or who had either relatives abroad with large homes or enough money to stay in hotels for long periods. The Palestinians’ political and economic leadership disappeared. By mid-May 1948, only one member of the Arab Higher Committee, the Palestinians’ “government,” was still in the country.

The flight of the professionals, civil servants, traders, and businessmen had a powerful impact on the Haifa Arab masses, who already were demoralized by the continual sniping and bomb attacks, the feeling that the Jews were stronger, and the sense that their own ragtag militia would fail when the test came (as indeed it did). The Arabs felt terribly isolated and insecure; the Arab half of Haifa was far from other major Arab population centers and was easily cut off by Jewish settlements along the approach roads to the city. Businesses and workshops closed, policemen shed their uniforms and left their posts, Arab workers could no longer commute to jobs in Jewish areas, and agricultural produce was interdicted in ambushes on the approach roads. Unemployment and prices soared. Thousands left.

Then came the Haganah attack of 21–22 April on the Arab districts. Several companies of Haganah Carmeli Brigade troops, under cover of constant mortar fire, drove down the Mount Carmel slope into the Arab downtown areas. Arab militia resistance collapsed in hours. Thousands of Arabs fled from outlying neighborhoods (such as Wadi Rushmiya and Halissa) into the British-controlled port area, piled into boats, and fled northward to Acre. The leaders who remained sued for a cease-fire.

Under British mediation, the Haganah agreed, offering what the British regarded as generous terms. But then, faced with Muslim pressure, the Arab leaders, most of them Christians, got cold feet; a cease-fire meant surrender and implied agreement to live under Jewish rule. They would be open to charges of collaboration and treachery. So, to the astonishment of the British officers and the Jewish military and political leaders gathered on the afternoon of 22 April at the town hall, the Arab delegates announced that their community would evacuate the city.

The Jewish mayor, Shabtai Levy, and the British commander, Maj. Gen. Hugh Stockwell, pleaded with the Arabs to reconsider. The Haganah representative at the meeting, Mordechai Makleff, declined to voice an opinion. But the Arabs were unmoved, and the mass exodus, which had begun under the impact of the Haganah ground and mortar assault, moved into top gear, with the British supplying boats and armored car escorts to the departing Arab convoys. From 22 April until 1 May, almost all the Arabs departed. The rough treatment—temporary evictions, house-to-house searches, detentions, and occasional beatings—meted out to the remaining population during those days by the Haganah and Irgun Zva'i Le'umi (IZL or Irgun) troops that occupied the downtown areas led many of the undecided to opt for evacuation as well. By early May, the city's Arab population had dwindled to three or four thousand.<sup>24</sup>

The bulk of the Palestinian refugees—some 250,000 to 300,000—went into exile during those weeks between early April and mid-June 1948, with the major precipitant being Jewish (Haganah/IZL/IDF) military attacks or the fear of such attacks. In most cases, the Jewish commanders, who wanted to occupy empty villages (occupying population villages meant leaving behind a garrison, which the units could not afford), were seldom confronted with deciding whether or not to expel an overrun community. Most villages and towns simply emptied at the first whiff of grapeshot.

In conformity with *Tochnit Dalet* (Plan D), the Haganah master plan, formulated in early March 1948, for securing the Jewish state areas in preparation for the expected declaration of statehood and the prospective Arab invasion, the Haganah cleared various areas completely of Arab villages—in the Jerusalem Corridor, around Kibbutz Mishmar Ha'emek, and along the Tel Aviv–Haifa coast road. But in most cases expulsion orders were not necessary; the inhabitants had already fled out of fear or as a result of Jewish attack. In several areas, Israeli commanders successfully used psychological warfare ploys (“Here’s some friendly ad-

vice. You'd better get out now before the Haganah troops come and rape your daughters") to obtain Arab evacuation.<sup>25</sup>

The basic structural weaknesses of prewar Palestinian society led to the dissolution of that society when the test of battle came. The lack of administrative structures, as well as weak leaders, a poor or nonexistent military organization beyond the single-village level, and faulty or nonexistent taxation mechanisms all caused the main towns to fall apart in April and May 1948. The fall of the towns and the exodus from them, in turn, brought a sense of fear and despondency to the hinterlands. Traditionally, the villages, though economically autarchic, had looked to the towns for political leadership and guidance. The exodus of the middle classes and Arab leaders, as well as the fall of the towns, provided the rural Palestinians with an example to emulate. Safad's fall and evacuation on 10–11 May, for example, triggered an immediate evacuation of the surrounding villages; so, earlier, did the fall of Haifa and the IZL assault on Jaffa (25–27 April).

Seen from the Jewish side, the spectacle of mass Arab evacuation certainly triggered appetites for more of the same. Everyone, at every level of military and political decision making, understood that a Jewish state without a large Arab minority would be stronger and more viable both militarily and politically. Therefore, the tendency of local military commanders to "nudge" Palestinians into flight increased as the war went on. Jewish atrocities—far more widespread than the Old Historians have indicated (there were massacres of Arabs at Dawayima, Eilabun, Jish, Safsaf, Hule, Saliha, and Sasa besides Deir Yassin and Lydda)—and the drive to avenge past Arab misdeeds also contributed significantly to the exodus.

The last major fallacy tackled incidentally or directly by the New Historians concerns an Israel that in 1948–49 was bent on making peace with its neighbors and an Arab world that monolithically rejected all peace overtures. The evidence that Israel's leader were not desperate to make peace and were unwilling to make the major concessions necessary to give peace a chance is overwhelming. In Tel Aviv, there was a sense of triumph and drunkenness that accompanied victory—a feeling that the Arabs would soon or eventually sue for peace, that there was no need to rush things or make concessions, that ultimately military victory and dominance would translate into diplomatic-political success.

As Ben-Gurion told an American journalist in mid-July 1949: "I am prepared to get up in the middle of the night in order to sign a peace agreement—but I am not in a hurry and I can wait ten years. We are

under no pressure whatsoever.”<sup>26</sup> Or, as Ben-Gurion records Abba Eban telling him: “[Eban] sees no need to run after peace. The armistice is sufficient for us; if we run after peace, the Arabs will demand a price of us—borders [i.e., in terms of territory] or refugees [i.e., repatriation] or both. Let us wait a few years.”<sup>27</sup>

As Pappé put it: “Abdullah’s eagerness [to make peace] was not reciprocated by the Israelis. The priorities of the state of Israel had changed during 1949. The armistice agreements brought relative calm to the borders, and peace was no longer the first priority. The government was preoccupied with absorbing new immigrants and overcoming economic difficulties.”<sup>28</sup>

Israel’s lack of emphasis on achieving peace was manifested most clearly in its protracted (1949–51) secret negotiations with Abdullah. Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett described his meeting with Jordan’s king at the palace in Shuneh on 5 May 1949 in the following way: “Transjordan said—we are ready for peace immediately. We said—certainly, we too want peace but one shouldn’t rush, one should walk.”<sup>29</sup> Israel and Jordan had just signed an armistice agreement, after much arm-twisting by Israel, which British and American diplomats compared to Hitler’s treatment of the Czechs in 1938–39. (As Abdullah put it, quoting an old Turkish saying: “If you meet a bear when crossing a rotten bridge, call her ‘dear auntie.’”) But the two sides never signed a peace treaty or a nonbelligerence agreement, something that was proposed at one point by Abdullah.

Shlaim, who in *Collusion* expands the description of the secret Israeli-Jordanian negotiations first provided in Dan Schueftan’s *Optziya Yardenit* (Jordanian Option), published in Israel in 1986, more or less lays the blame for the failed negotiations on Israeli shoulders. A more generous, less anti-Israeli interpretation of the evidence would blame the Israelis and the Jordanians equally.

Israel refused to offer major concessions in terms of refugee repatriation or territory (Abdullah was particularly keen on getting back Lydda and Ramle) and was too long unwilling to offer Jordan a sovereign corridor through its territory to the sea at Gaza. Throughout, Israel was prodded if not guided by the “blatant expansionism” of some of Ben-Gurion’s aides, including Moshe Dayan. As Yehoshafat Harkabi, one of Dayan’s military colleagues, put it (according to Shlaim): “The existential mission of the State of Israel led us to be demanding and acquisitive, and mindful of the value of every square metre of land.”<sup>30</sup> In any case, Ben-Gurion refused to meet Abdullah, and the Israeli leaders spoke of Abdullah with undeserved contempt.

At one point, Shlaim writes that “two principal factors were responsible for the failure of the post-war negotiations: Israel’s strength and Abdullah’s weakness.”<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, Shlaim seems to attribute too much weight to the first and too little to the second. He does not sufficiently acknowledge the importance of the “Palestinization” of Jordan following the Hashemite annexation of the West Bank, which quickly resulted in the curtailment of Abdullah’s autonomy and freedom of political movement both within Jordan and in the Arab world in general. The twin pressures exercised by the Arab world outside and his successive cabinets inside the kingdom successfully impeded Abdullah’s ability to make a separate peace with Israel. He almost did so a number of times, but he always held back at the last moment and refused to take the plunge. It is possible, Shlaim argues, that more generous concession by Tel Aviv at certain critical points in the negotiations would have given Abdullah greater motivation to pursue peace as well as the ammunition he needed to silence his antipeace critics, but the truth of such a claim is uncertain. What is clear is that Abdullah, though showing remarkable courage throughout, simply felt unable in those years to go against the unanimous or near-unanimous wishes of his ministers and against the unanimous antipeace stand of the surrounding Arab world.

What happened with Abdullah occurred in miniature and more briefly with Egypt and Syria. In September and October of 1948, Egypt’s King Farouk, knowing that the war was lost, secretly sent a senior court official to Paris to sound out Israel on the possibility of a peace based on Israeli cession of parts of the Negev and the Gaza Strip to Egypt. Sharett and the senior staff at the Foreign Ministry favored continued negotiations, but Ben-Gurion—bent on a further round of hostilities to drive the Egyptian army out of the Negev—flatly rejected the overture. According to Shlaim, Ben-Gurion “may have been right in thinking that nothing of substance would come out of these talks. But he surely owed his cabinet colleagues at least a report on what had taken place so that they could review their decision to go [again] to war against Egypt on the basis of all the relevant information.”<sup>32</sup> New Egyptian peace overtures in November, after Israel’s Operation Yoav, again came to naught.

As for Syria, in May 1949 its new ruler, Col. Husni Za’im, made major peace proposals, which included recognition of Israel as well as Syrian readiness to absorb hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees. Za’im wanted Israel to concede a sliver of territory along the Jordan River and the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee and to share the waters of the Jordan and the Sea of Galilee. He asked to meet with Ben-Gurion.

Again Ben-Gurion rejected the proposal, writing on 12 May: "I am quite prepared to meet Col. Za'im in order to promote peace. . . . But I see no purpose in any such meeting as long as the representatives of Syria in the armistice negotiations do not declare in an unequivocal manner that their forces are prepared to withdraw to their pre-war territory [i.e., withdraw from the small Syrian-occupied Mishmar HaYarden salient, west of the Jordan]." <sup>33</sup>

Continued feelers by Za'im resulted in another Israeli refusal. As Sharett put it on 23 May: "It is clear that we . . . won't agree that any bit of the Land of Israel be transferred to Syria, because this is a question of control over the water sources." <sup>34</sup> Shabtai Rosenne, the legal adviser at the Foreign Ministry, put it simply: "I feel that the need for an agreement between Israel and Syria pressed more heavily on the Syrians." <sup>35</sup> Therefore, why rush toward peace? A few weeks later, Za'im was overthrown and executed. The Syrian peace initiative died with him. Whether the overture was serious or merely tactical—to obtain Western sympathy and funds, for example—is unclear. What is certain is that Israel failed to pursue it.

What was true of Israel's one-on-one contacts with each of the Arab states was true also of its negotiations with the Arabs under UN auspices at Lausanne in the spring and summer of 1949. There, too, Israel was ungenerous (though, needless to say, the Arabs were equally unyielding). For months, UN officials and the United States pressed Israel to make what they felt might be the redemptive gesture: to proclaim its willingness to take back several hundred thousand refugees. As the months dragged on and Israel remained inflexible, the Arabs became just as obstinate. When at last Israel offered to take back "one hundred thousand," which, in reality, as Sharett explained to his colleagues, was only sixty-five thousand (Sharett told Mapai leaders that some thirty-five thousand refugees had already returned to Israel illegally or were about to return as part of the family reunification scheme and that these refugees would be deducted from the total), <sup>36</sup> it was a case of too little too late. And Israel's more realistic offer—to take the Gaza Strip with its resident and refugee populations—was never seriously entertained by Egypt. Lausanne was probably the last chance for a comprehensive Israeli-Arab peace.

In *Pirkei Avot*, it is written: "Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel was wont to say: "On three things the world rests: on justice, on truth and on peace"" (1:18). And he would quote the prophet Zechariah: "[E]xecute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates" (8:16). Telling the truth



thus seems to be an injunction anchored in Jewish tradition, and the scriptures apparently link truth to peace in some indeterminate manner.

The New History is one of the signs of a maturing Israel (though, no doubt, there are those who say it is a symptom of decay and degeneration). What is now being written about Israel's past seems to offer us a more balanced and truthful view of the country's history than what has been offered hitherto. It may also in some obscure way serve the purposes of peace and reconciliation between the warring tribes of that land.

## NOTES

This essay was originally published in *Tikkun* (Nov.–Dec. 1988): 19–23, 99–102.

1. Zerubavel Gil'ad, ed., *Sefer Hapalmah* (Tel Aviv, 1956), (Heb.) 2:565; Third Battalion/Intelligence, "Comprehensive Report on the Third Battalion's Actions from Friday 9.7 until Sunday 18.7," 19 July 1948, IDFA 922\75\1237.

2. Dani HQ to Yiftah and 8th Brigades, 12 July 1948, IDFA 922\75\1234. The cable, in coded form, is also reproduced in IDFA 922\75\1237, issued at 13:30 hours, 12 July 1948.

3. Dani HQ to General Staff/Operations, 11:35 hours, 13 July 1948, IDFA 922\75\1235.

4. Segev (Sabagh) Shmuel, ed., *Be'einei Oyev* [In Enemy Eyes] (Heb.) (Tel Aviv, 1954), 36.

5. Gil'ad, *Sefer Hapalmah*, 2:718.

6. Israel Defense Forces, *Toldot Milhemet Hakomemiyet* [History of the War of Independence], (Tel Aviv, 1959), (Heb.) 259.

7. Nethanel Lorch, *The Edge of the Sword: Israel's War of Independence, 1947–1949* (New York, 1961), 286. Interestingly, the selfsame sentence also appears in the third, revised version of the book, published in 1989. There Lorch added (p. 424) that in light of the great suffering of the Lydda evictees, the Yiftah Brigade mobilized fifty buses to ferry them to the legion lines. This is incorrect. The Lydda refugees walked. But the Ramle evictees (whom Lorch does not mention) were supplied with buses by the Kiryati Brigade.

8. Michael Bar-Zohar, *Ben-Gurion* (Heb.) (Tel Aviv, 1977), 2:775.

9. Elhannan Orren, *Baderekh el Ha'ir* [On the Road to the City] (Heb.) (Israel, 1976), 123–27.

10. Peretz Kidron, "Truths Whereby Nations Live," in *Blaming the Victims*, ed. Edward Said and Christopher Hitchens (London, 1988), 85–96.

11. Simha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* (London and New York, 1987), 4.

12. Avi Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (Oxford, 1988), 16.

13. D. Ben-Gurion to A. Ben-Gurion, 5 October 1937, Ben-Gurion Correspondence, IDFA. This quotation and the next one did not appear in the original *Tikkun* article, which included quotations to the same effect but not as powerful.

14. Protocol of meeting of Jewish Agency Executive, 7 June 1938, CZA S100/28.
15. Shlaim, *Collusion*, 33.
16. *Ibid.*, 116–20; Pappé, *Britain*, 10.
17. Shlaim, *Collusion*, 139; Pappé, *Britain*, 16–18.
18. Flapan, *Birth*, 9, 186.
19. Shlaim, *Collusion*, 201, 203.
20. Pappé, *Britain*, 23–25.
21. Shlaim, *Collusion*, 196–205.
22. Israel State Archives, “The People’s Administration, Protocols 18 April–13 May 1948.” 67, protocol of meeting held on 12 May 1948. Today I would describe the shifting balance of forces between the Yishuv and the Palestinians and the Arab states in more nuanced terms (see Morris, “The Complexity of Assessing the Balance of Forces between Israel and the Arabs in the 1948 War,” in *The Few against the Many?* ed. A. Kadish and B. Z. Kedar (Jerusalem, 2006), 41–48.
23. See A. Kadish and B. Z. Kedar, eds., *The Few against the Many?* particularly the essays by Amitzur Ilan, Yosef Heller, Benny Morris, Yehoshua Ben-Arieh, Eyal Naveh, Mordechai Bar-On, and Zaki Shalom; Amitzur Ilan, *The Origin of the Arab-Israeli Arms Race: Arms, Embargo, Military Power, and Decision in the 1948 Palestine War* (1996). Haim Levenberg, *The Military Preparations of the Arab Community in Palestine, 1945–1948* (London, 1993), is illuminating about the Arab side.
24. See Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge, 1987).
25. Such ploys were used, for example, in the Galilee Panhandle in May 1948 (see *ibid.*, 122).
26. Shlaim, *Collusion*, 465.
27. David Ben-Gurion, *Yoman HaMilhama* [War Diary], (Tel Aviv, 1982), 3:993, entry for 14 July 1949.
28. Pappé, *Britain*, 188.
29. Israel State Archives, ed. Yamima Rosenthal, *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel, May–December 1949* (Jerusalem, 1986), 4:68.
30. Shlaim, *Collusion*, 444–45.
31. *Ibid.*, 621.
32. *Ibid.*, 320.
33. Israel State Archives, *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel, Armistice Negotiations with the Arab States, December 1948–July 1949* (Jerusalem, 1983), 3:563.
34. *Ibid.*, 4:69.
35. *Ibid.*, 3:582.
36. Morris, *Birth*, 278–83.