

*Mordechai Bar-On*

## **Remembering 1948**

Personal Recollections, Collective  
Memory, and the Search for  
“What Really Happened”

### **Collective Memory and the New History**

Israelis have been revisiting the events of the 1948 war for the past fifty years, not only because they were branded with the personal memories of the generation that lived through them, nor simply because they were crucial to the Jewish state's political and social makeup, but primarily because they still occupy a major segment of the collective memory that constitutes Israel's mental space and identity.

Israel's landscape is saturated with sites that carry the memories of that war. Children's textbooks are laden with stories and poems that pay tribute to it; our calendar contains numerous dates that reconnect us to it. Travelers from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem may well ask at the start of the journey, near the community of Mishmar HaShiv'a, which straddles the road, who the “seven” are that are memorialized by its name. As they reach the foothills, they may observe the large fortress of Latrun, which was recently made into the main commemoration site of Israel's Armored Corps. As the winding road starts to climb, they may wonder about the ruined armored vehicles lining it, which are draped in the national flag on Independence Day. They may also notice the strange chrome monument in the shape of a giant broom erected in memory of the troops that broke through the siege of Jerusalem (*Andartat Ha-Portzim*). Next the road runs through the Castel passage, abutted by concrete walls emblazoned with the name of the Harel Brigade.

The construction of these memories, and the interpretation of the events they come to remind us of, have been the subject of animated dissent since 1948. The wide divergence between the different accounts is well known to scholars who have researched specific battles and tried to grasp “what really happened” by recording personal testimonies. Most of the testimonies of “participants,” moreover, are mere hearsay since each individual has firsthand experience only of a very narrow portion of the

events; yet she or he tells us a complete story, based on details heard after the event from other actors in the drama. As these stories are told and retold, especially when carried forward by nonparticipants, they innocently or intentionally become distorted by prejudice, loyalties, presumptions, and even political interests. The field of memory is thus wide open for an ongoing battle over national narratives.

Collective memory should properly be called dominant memory, that is, memory shared by the majority of the public at a given time. There are, however, always other memories carried, for one reason or another, by part or parts of the population and diverging from the dominant one. Thus, for example, the Arabs of Nazareth who survived the war, or their descendants, may remember the events of Operation Dekel, in which the town was occupied by the Jews in July 1948, differently from the veterans of the Seventh Brigade or their descendants.

This diversity is endemic to all collective memories; one version or another becomes prevalent, leaving the rest embedded in fewer carriers. Ruling elites obviously play a major role in shaping collective memory since they control most of the agencies of state commemoration, command more influence in the networks of education, and enjoy more access to the media.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, dominant memory does not always ensue from vested interested or manipulation. Often, it evolves spontaneously on the basis of accumulated "firsthand testimonies." This is not to say that it is more authentic or more accurate. It only means that it is not fabricated, as some postmodern sociologists would have us believe, but may rely on a specific kind of knowledge of real events and facts.

Furthermore, even if ruling elites do consciously manipulate public memory, this is seldom based on falsification, at least in democratic societies. They can hardly tout notions totally detached from reality for there will always be qualified people to rebut them and put forth their own narratives to set the record straight and uncover the truth.

Over the past few years, we have seen a concerted attack on the dominant Israeli narrative of the 1948 war. New Historians and critical sociologists, dissatisfied with the educational impact and political implications of the traditional story, have begun to weave an alternative account.

One of the arguments used by the New Historians to delegitimize older historiographies is that earlier writers, who in many cases were also participants in the events they describe, were motivated by apologetic tendencies, burdened by excessive pride or guilt, and therefore impelled

to justify the policies and actions of their generation. The Old Historians counter these allegations by claiming that the younger generation of scholars suffers from alienation and therefore does not have the necessary empathy and imagination to reconstruct history. Archival documents may only corroborate what these writers knew or thought they knew. But contemporary knowledge may also be wrong and is always partial since even those who were there never had access to the full, complex picture of events. Historiography that lacks acquaintance with the complete context and zeitgeist, that lacks a thorough understanding of the circumstances in which the story unfolded—so goes the counterargument—remains barren and deficient and fails to reconstruct the events “as they really were.”

There is a measure of justice in both positions. Those who helped shape history must always bear in mind that the parts they had to play in order to realize their aspirations cannot but affect their perceptions of both past realities and their own roles in them. The historian wishing to relate events in which he participated and hoping to achieve a minimal standard of objectivity, must never stop searching himself and his motives; he must cross-examine his assumptions and constantly strive to overcome his preconceptions, putting them to the test again and again. The young historian, on the other hand, must make every effort to piece together the mood of the time in question and grasp the dynamic, evolving context of the past events he is analyzing.

As regards the 1948 war, I had the opportunity to play a multiple role. In the war itself, I served as a company commander in the battles against the Egyptians on the southern front and later against the Iraqis on the central front. In the 1950s, I served as chief of the IDF's History Branch, the main assignment being to research and record the history of Israel's War of Independence. In the 1960s, as the army's chief education officer, I initiated and supervised the transmission to all ranks of what we call battle legacies, which amounted to nothing less than inculcating the dominant memory and “correct” understanding of the events. Since the end of the 1970s, I have been engaged in academic research on Israel's political and military history in its first two decades, including the 1948 war. In this capacity, I have had the opportunity to comb through different archives in Israel and abroad, record oral histories, and come face-to-face with the narratives and explanations of other historians.

In the following pages, I shall reconsider the 1948 war and deal with four issues that have been raised by some New Historians as a counter-narrative to the established story.

Who started the war and could it have been avoided?

Were the Jews the David who defeated Goliath?

Who was responsible for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem?

Why did efforts to transform the armistice agreements into final-status peace treaties fail?

I shall try to treat these issues on three levels: my personal recollections, the dominant Israeli collective memory, and an academic historian's view.

### **The Initiation of the 1948 War**

Traditional Zionist historiography tends to date the start of the 1948 war with the attack on a Jewish bus near Lydda Airport on the morning of November 30, 1947, just a few hours after the UN General Assembly adopted the resolution to partition Palestine into two states, Jewish and Arab. This cutoff point places the blame on the Arabs for perpetrating violence and making the war inevitable. Some New Historians, on the other hand, see the war as a watershed after which the violent Jewish-Arab conflict became intractable, and they do not blame the Jews any less. Some argue that the war could have been avoided had the Zionists not escalated the violence by overreacting and insisting on declaring an exclusively Jewish state.<sup>2</sup>

At this point, I should disclose my own basic convictions as to the grounds for the Arab-Israeli conflict in general. The century-old conflict between the Zionist movement and the Arab national movement is neither the result of an error committed by either side nor the result of a misunderstanding by either side of the true motivations of the other. The bitter confrontation was unavoidable from the moment that Jews decided, at the end of the nineteenth century, to regain their national sovereignty in Palestine, a piece of territory they have always referred to as the Land of Israel (Eretz-Israel) but which was occupied by another people. The root of the conflict lies in a tragic clash between two sets of motivations and processes, which, to begin with, were essentially independent of one another but in time became inextricably entangled and collided head-on. It was a clash of deep-set aspirations and motivations,

each born under totally different circumstances at a different place and time, that eventually drew both protagonists into continuous violent hostilities.

The first generations of Zionists innocently believed in the justice of their ideas, which were forged in Europe well before the American president Woodrow Wilson proclaimed the universal right to self-determination. Zionism, in many ways, was a unique colonial phenomenon, a child of its time, and was seen by Europeans as the moral vindication of injustices done to Jews for generations. Obviously, the Arabs could not understand why they had to pay the price for these injustices. By 1948, however, there was already an entire generation of young Jews, born or at least reared in Palestine, who had no other place in the world they could call home, and they fought for survival and independence with their backs to the wall.

Across the firing line, the Palestinians understandably and vehemently confronted the uninvited Jewish intrusion, which threatened to strip them of their lands and their own right to national existence and independence. Obviously, they could not accept without a struggle the logic and justifications of Zionism, which derived from circumstances to which they had not been a party and for which they were not responsible. For them, too, this was a struggle for survival.

To hold on to their sense of innocence, many early Zionists desperately sought to believe that eventually the Arabs would realize that Zionism did not intend to displace them but rather to build an entity of its own alongside them. This proved to be impossible. For most inhabitants of Palestine, the 1948 war only highlighted the well-known fact that the basic aspirations of Jews and Arabs in the land were irreconcilable and the conflict had become a zero-sum game.

Be that as it may, the nineteen-year-old native Palestinian Jew I was at the time could not do much about all these complex arguments. Regardless of whether or not my father and mother had been right to leave Germany and come to Palestine in 1924, I, in 1948, could see no alternative but to fight for my life and our national aspirations. When the war broke out, I performed my "national service" as a station commander with the Jewish Settlement Police (JSP) in my hometown of Rishon LeZion. Formally, the JSP was supervised by the British; actually, however, it came under the auspices of the Jewish paramilitary, underground organization, the Haganah. Like all Jews in Palestine, I too, burst onto the streets as soon as the UN General Assembly voted in favor of the establishment of a Jewish state, and I, too, danced the night away drunk with joy. Early the next

morning, my rifle and I escorted a bus en route to Tel Aviv. When we passed through the Arab village of Yazur, perched astride the road, we came under fire and the bus driver was wounded in the arm. This was the first act of violence I encountered, and it was clearly initiated by Arabs. A few weeks later, Elik Shamir, who commanded the station on the other side of the line, and six members of his squad were ambushed at the same spot and killed to a man. Had it been my turn to check the road, I would not now be writing these lines. Thus, from the perspective of my personal memory, the war, unequivocally, was the result of aggression on the part of Palestinian Arabs, who turned a short, peaceful drive from my home to Tel Aviv into a highly dangerous adventure.<sup>3</sup>

It may be assumed that many young Jews of my generation in Palestine had similar experiences. In their minds, these memories firmly implanted the perception as to how the war came about: as a result of Arab refusal to accept the UN verdict and of Arab aggression, which endangered our lives in very real terms.

This has remained the way that Israel's collective memory—transmitted to following generations by popular historiography and other means of commemoration—sees the story. These perceptions were not invented; they stemmed from the recurrent, very real experiences shared by so many members of this generation. Despite its clear bias, the Israeli narrative, which makes the Arabs the culprit in the violence, was not the result of manipulation but reflected the actual experience of numerous contemporary Israelis.

Nevertheless, the self-righteous, moral significance inherent in the common Zionist narrative evades deeper questions. What is aggression? Is the aggressor always the one who fires the first shot in defense of his endangered, vital interests? Perhaps this sort of violence should be seen as a desperate attempt by Palestinian Arabs to defend rights that may well be considered legitimate. Is it absurd to claim that the UN partition plan was an act of aggression against their legitimate rights? Was their refusal to accept the UN verdict as illogical and immoral as the common Zionist narrative would have it? In this respect, the war did not start on November 30, 1947, at Yazur. Rather, Yazur, by then, was only a new phase in a fifty-year-old conflict.

On the other hand, what choice did my friends and I have but to fight back? I was born in this country. Like other people, I wanted to live under my own national rule, just as the Arabs who shot at me that sad morning wanted to live under Arab rule. I feel truly sorry for what happened, but I cannot feel any remorse, and if I had to do it all over again

I would act exactly as I did then in order to realize my right to self-determination and independence. This moral stance, however, obliges me to attribute the same values and rights to the Palestinians. Moreover, since the existence of my state is assured, I should be able to understand that the 1948 war, and the Arab-Israeli conflict in general, is not simply a tale of good guys versus bad but the tragic story of an unavoidable clash between two opposing sets of interests, legacies, and perceptions emanating from the existential conditions under which both involved parties lived.

### **Retaliation and Escalation**

Another question raised by some historical revisionists is whether the war, once begun, could not have been stopped.<sup>4</sup> During the first months of the war, so goes the argument, only a handful of Palestinians took part in anti-Jewish violence. According to this version, by December 1947 and January 1948 a significant portion of the Palestinian elite and wide segments of the Palestinian lower classes (workers and farmers) were keenly interested in halting the violence and avoiding escalation into a general war. This was due to the heavy blows sustained by the followers of the mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al Husseini, in the 1936–39 revolt, the sharp controversies permeating Palestinian society, the growing, self-serving interference of the surrounding Arab states in Palestinian affairs, the obvious lack of military and civic preparedness among the Arab population for the ongoing conflict, and some serious economic interests (such as bringing in the orange crop). This description of Arab Palestinian society at the outbreak of violence is often based on the well-known protocol of a meeting held by David Ben-Gurion at the beginning of January 1948 with the chiefs of the intelligence services, a number of experts on Arab affairs, and political advisers.<sup>5</sup> Many of the participants recommended deescalation and restrained Israeli reaction.

The “revisionists” argue that the Haganah’s policy of limited reprisals as Arab violence spread throughout the country, and especially the unbridled raids undertaken by the dissident Irgun and Stern Gang soon after the outbreak of hostilities, contributed significantly to the unnecessary and avoidable escalation of warfare; Jewish retaliation rallied many Arabs to the ranks of the mufti and weakened the hand of his opponents and thus turned the initial low-intensity struggle into an uncompromising, full-scale civil war. Indeed, there were some local agreements not to

interfere with the citrus exports, and these were maintained de facto in most of the areas concerned. On January 8, Ben-Gurion reported to his Mapai Party Central Committee that “a secret agreement had been reached to quietly see through the citrus season,” and he called for moderation to counter the mufti’s attempt to draw uninvolved farmers into the fray.<sup>6</sup> But these were local, temporary arrangements, soon disrupted.

The revisionist assumption that the spread of warfare was avoidable is, in my opinion, tainted by a fair measure of paternalism and lack of respect for Palestinian Arabs. Every national struggle begins with a small, active minority that undertakes to lead the fight. Often, this minority remains in splendid isolation for a long time, encountering a good deal of internal opposition since its activities frequently endanger the interests of broad groups among its conationals and make everyday life very difficult. Gradually, however, the activists win over the silent majority by means of ideological propaganda, as well as intimidation, provocation, and even direct, physical pressure. Yet no such measures can succeed if no real national grievances and energies underlie the situation in the first place. Opposition to the Zionist venture, and later to the UN partition resolution, was quite widespread among a vast majority of the Palestinian people, who emotionally supported the mufti’s call for resistance. Arab opposition to the Jews was popular and real and could not be dispelled in the long run by economic interests.

Not all the reprisals initiated by the Haganah in the early months of intercommunal warfare were justified or well considered. Unintentional loss was often inflicted on innocent people who were not actively involved in the strife. As a squad leader, I took part in one of those early raids. In retaliation for the murder on the Jerusalem road in late December of Yehoshua Globerman, a senior Haganah commander, it was decided to raid a large building in the village of Qazaza, where some Palestinian guerrillas were allegedly based. I can testify to the genuine intention to strike at the culprits, but as it happened the night assault was carried out on the wrong building and caused the deaths of women and children. I was obliged to open fire on a cluster of tents near the main target from which fire was being directed at my small group. There is no way I will ever know whether or not I killed innocent civilians. It was too dark to see, and we had to retreat as soon as the “large” house was demolished.<sup>7</sup>

One can imagine the anger and desire for revenge our attack aroused among the inhabitants of that village, but there is no way of knowing whether the attacks on Jewish traffic to and from Jerusalem in

this area would have stopped had we not retaliated for Globberman's murder. It seems safer to assume that the Palestinian leadership would have continued its attempt to cut the communication lines between Jewish Jerusalem and its bases on the coast. The events of 1948 were not an "exhibition game" or a symposium on wartime morality. Both sides soon played it as a zero-sum game.

### **David against Goliath**

Ben-Gurion often described the 1948 war as the victory of a few against many or, metaphorically, as the battle between David and Goliath. Even as the fighting proceeded, he referred to it as "campaign between unequal forces, a war on one against forty."<sup>8</sup> In one of his early summaries of the war, he wrote: "World history does not record many cases of a war of so many against so few, as young Israel has experienced."<sup>9</sup> In religious circles, people referred to the Jewish victory as a divine miracle. This image was deeply internalized in Israel's collective memory and is very much alive even today, three generations after the events. All attempts by historians to dispel it and prove that the balance of power between the contending forces during much of the war inclined in favor of the Jews are in vain. I personally have met with anger from Israeli audiences when spelling out the exact figures of this balance. The false image stems from three sources.

1. At the time, the Jewish public in Palestine had no knowledge of the exact size of the contending armed forces at different phases of the war or any inkling of the arsenal that the Haganah had procured and secretly stored around the world in anticipation of Britain quitting the arena. The starting point for the man on the street was the well-known fact that the population of the Arab states, even counting only those directly bordering Palestine, was ten times greater than the Jewish population. In addition, the average Jew also knew that the Arab states had maintained regular armies for years and had obtained types of armaments that the Haganah could not yet dream of. Even allowing for the Jewish advantage in technology and organization, it was hard to imagine that the Arabs would not enter the field with forces far superior to those the Jews could muster.

2. Twice during the war the Arabs managed to gain temporary superiority on the battlefield, raising great doubt, at least in the minds of many Jews, about the eventual outcome of the war. By the end of March

1948, the Haganah had endured three painful defeats in the battle to keep its lines of communication open. Three large Jewish convoys, at Hulda, at Nabi Daniel, and on the road to Yehi'am had been attacked and suffered heavy casualties.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, for a brief period the road to Jerusalem seemed to be cut off, and its Jewish community appeared to be on the verge of starvation amid a dearth of arms and ammunition. On April 6, Ben Gurion reported to the Zionist Action Committee: "Hebrew Jerusalem is partially cut off all the time. For the past 10 days, it has been completely isolated and faces a serious danger of starvation. Almost all other roads are in disarray, Jews cannot set out without risking their lives."<sup>11</sup>

As we now know, the entire Palestinian force, including many of the volunteer forces that the Arab League had sent to Palestine during the winter of 1948, was routed by the Haganah in its first major offensive in April and May. We also know that this was not a miracle since the Jews managed during the first half of 1948 to mobilize a force significantly superior to the forces the Arabs put into the field before May 15. Nevertheless, the painful memories of the defeats at the end of March, as well as other setbacks sustained by the Jews elsewhere in the early phases of the war, starkly etched the memory of those who lived through the events and imprinted on their collective memory a sense of weakness and vulnerability that subsequent victories could not eradicate. The fall of "The Thirty-Five" on the way to Gush Etzion, in a battle against hundreds of Arab combatants, and, for me personally, the fall of eleven of my friends from the Haganah unit of my native town when large numbers of Arab irregulars attacked them in the citrus orchards of Gan Yavne—bodies I was called on to inspect and help identify—left us all with a vivid image of the few against the many.

Before those painful impressions could be offset by the victories of April and May, the invasion of the regular armies of five Arab states on May 15 helped the "enemy" achieve real superiority, if not in the total number of troops then at least in the quality of its armaments. For four weeks the Israel Defense Forces had to wage battle against an enemy employing weapons to which it had no effective response.

Moreover, in many sections of the fighting lines, the Arabs, taking the initiative at that stage, managed to muster forces greatly superior to the defending Jewish troops, while Israel had to deploy meager forces along strung-out lines vulnerable to Arab onslaught. Indeed, the worst defeats the Israelis suffered during the war took place during these weeks (at Gush Etzion, Latrun, Yad Mordechai, Nitzanim, Jenin, Hill 69, and

other places). The sense of weakness, vulnerability, and imminent danger of defeat was not imaginary at this point in time; it was real. When, a few days before the invasion, General Yadin, the chief of operations, was asked by members of the provisional government about the chances of standing up to the expected Arab attack, he replied: "Fifty, fifty." This was a sober assessment based on accurate calculations.<sup>12</sup>

3. Even in those sections where Jewish settlements and IDF units managed to repel Arab assaults (at Negba, Nirim, Degania, Gesher, etc.), it was rough going. In most of these places, the defenders had only light weapons, no defense against tanks apart from a few antiquated Projector Infantry Anti-Tanks (PIATs) and Molotov cocktails, and no artillery or air support against the armor and canons, which exacted a heavy toll of casualties. The urge to tell a heroic tale and immortalize fallen comrades, understandably, meant highlighting the images of weakness and vulnerability that could be overcome only by exceptional bravery and dedication. But this narrative was not invented. Rather it reflected honest memories of the way things looked to participants at the time.

On May 28, 1948, when the Egyptian advance guard reached the Palestinian village of Isdud on the coastal road, less than thirty miles south of Tel Aviv, I was ordered to deploy my platoon across that road a few miles to the north of the Egyptian encampment. In preparation, I went on a reconnaissance tour, getting as close as I could to the Egyptian forward column. I clearly remember the sight through my binoculars or rather what I thought I saw: a heavy concentration of Egyptian tanks, armored cars, and heavy guns. At the time, I assumed that this column intended to proceed toward Tel Aviv and I was supposed to stop them with my thirty ill-trained, ill-equipped men. We had in our possession only a few World War II rifles, a few Sten submachine guns, two light machine guns, some antitank mines, one PIAT, and a dozen Molotov cocktails. My mission seemed suicidal.

At nightfall, after having stationed and briefed my men, I found a small irrigation ditch beneath some citrus trees and tried to take a short nap. In my mind's eye, I could clearly see my entire platoon being trampled to death the next morning by the Egyptian column galloping its way to Tel Aviv. I did not know then that the Egyptians would decide not to continue their advance to the north. Seven years later, as the head of the IDF History Department, I researched some of these events and discovered that the overall balance of forces in the south between the invading Egyptians and the Israelis had not been to our disadvantage at all. Nevertheless, these late insights could not wrest from my mind the

memory of the staggering fear and alarm I felt that day at the sight of the Egyptian encampment near Isdud.

Many Israeli combatants and civilians who lived and fought on and around the front lines shared this experience of fear and vulnerability, stories about the experience were told and retold. It was thus stored in the collective memory of this generation and transmitted to later generations as a fundamental belief in the great superiority of the invading Arab forces in May of 1948. The end of the story is well known. Israel managed to use the truce imposed by the UN Security Council to its benefit. It succeeded in producing and procuring some heavier equipment, including tanks and airplanes. It managed to recruit a new cohort, including many Holocaust survivors straight from the displaced persons camps in Europe, thereby replenishing its depleted ranks and building several additional formations, including an armored brigade and quite a few artillery battalions. Toward the end of the war, Israel achieved distinct superiority in terms of both men and weapons. Despite their initial vulnerability, the Israelis, through efficient organization and improvisation, managed to fully utilize their resources and end the war victoriously.

When the Palmah fighters defeated the Arab forces of Safad in May and conquered the town, a local rabbi told them that their feat had been the result of a lucky combination of action and miracle: the action was the prayers of his devout community; the miracle was the timely arrival of the Palmah. There is much truth in this anecdote since divine miracles are always performed through the agency of people. The “miracle” that helped the 650,000 Jews of Palestine defeat 1.3 million Palestinians and the Arab armies of neighboring states was effected through the Jewish ability to mobilize a superior force and defy the initial demographic imbalance. It was a miracle, indeed, but someone had to perform it.

A few days before the Arab invasion of Palestine, George Marshall, the celebrated American general who served as secretary of state at the time, warned the Jews against establishing a state of their own then since it could end in disaster and total annihilation. This assessment was not unfounded. The factors responsible for the eventual balance of power can never be fully ascertained in advance of the ordeal. Enemy mistakes, disparate motivations and stamina, and the ability of soldiers to stand firm under conditions of local inferiority are all factors that cannot be evaluated beforehand. When fear of the unknown turns into the joy of victory, it is natural to experience an unexpected sense of redemption, much as the defeated side feels betrayed and frustrated.

If I may be permitted a slight digression, it is perhaps not unreason-

able to generalize that, more often than not, soldiers at war feel outnumbered, especially when on the defensive. The rank and file never see the entire picture. They see only the forces concentrated by the enemy at the very spot where they happen to be fighting. On January 3, 1949, just before the last battle in the Negev ended the war, I was involved in a local, small-scale battle with Iraqi forces deployed in the Samarian foothills on the central front. The previous night, I and some two dozen of my men had taken a small hill held by local Palestinian irregulars, who kept harassing Jewish settlers and sniping at a neighboring kibbutz. Early the next morning we came under heavy artillery and mortar fire from Iraqi batteries stationed a couple of miles down the hill. Soon an Iraqi infantry company tried to storm our position. Albeit no more than a local skirmish, it turned out to be a battle in which I was wounded and lost seven of my men. Understandably, I retain a sharp memory of the day's events. I clearly remember that at the peak of the Iraqi assault we were shelled by a squadron of four armored cars mounted with six-pounder guns, which completely outranged every weapon in our possession and was able to blast us with impunity. At least sixty to eighty infantrymen, who at one point came as close as one hundred yards from our positions, were repelled by our hand grenades. We were clearly outnumbered at this spot although by then I knew that the overall picture was quite different. For those of my men who survived the ordeal, this was clearly the fight of a few against great odds.

Israel's collective memory, which remembers the 1948 war as the victory of the few against the many, is not mistaken, although it was not the hand of God that intervened but human energy and resourcefulness. That's what changed the odds. For the same reason, it is doubtful that the detailed researches of the New Historians will manage to change the popular perception. Collective memory, in general, has a high resistance to innovations based on research, especially when that memory feeds on national pride and a sense of moral superiority.

### **Flight, Expulsion, or Both? The Palestinian Refugees**

The creation of the Palestinian refugee problem received excellent historiographic treatment by Benny Morris. His narrative is complex, variegated, and on the whole balanced. With the help of ample documentation, Morris analyzes step by step the flight of the Palestinian elite at

the beginning of the intercommunal war and the mass exodus from the rural areas in April and May resulting from the terror created by the Deir Yassin massacre. He also analyzes the eventual initiatives taken by local IDF commanders, with the tacit approval of the higher echelons, to expel Palestinians from occupied regions in such places as Lydda, Ramle, and many villages in most fighting zones, but also the refusal of others to uproot civilians, as happened in Nazareth in July and in many villages in the Galilee in October.

The official Israeli narrative, which attempts to exonerate the IDF of all blame for the expulsion and refuses to admit any responsibility for the creation of the problem, is still widely prevalent in Israel's canonical memory. This version, more so than the issues we have dealt with till now, was the result of conscious manipulation by Israeli propaganda, aimed at fending off the insistent, international pressure put on Israel to grant Palestinian refugees a choice between return and compensation. Nevertheless, in this case, too, the common stereotype was based on the genuine experience of many Israeli soldiers, who in numerous places witnessed the flight of Palestinian inhabitants without waiting for a Jewish initiative to expel them or even encourage their flight.

As mentioned earlier, during the war I served first as a platoon commander and later as a company commander in the Giv'ati Brigade, participating in attacks on, and the conquest of, more than a dozen Arab villages in the southern coastal plain. I can testify that all these villages were practically empty when we arrived. By dawn, we could often see the fellahin with their women and children in the distance, making their way toward the Arab lines. I knew that in other villages some of the inhabitants who had not left were ordered to do so. Yet I am sure that thousands of Israeli soldiers carry with them the memory of flight rather than expulsion. Ezra Danin, a senior member of Israel's intelligence service, did not lie when he stated in his memoirs: "The Arab exodus was a surprise to us all. . . . In April, we witnessed a mass Arab flight, despite promises made to the inhabitants of the villages in the Sharon and the Shfela [the coastal plain between Haifa and Gaza] that no harm would be done them. . . . Once the great exodus started, it spread like brushfire, like a plague."<sup>13</sup>

Still, there is no small measure of self-righteousness and evasiveness in the official Israeli waiver of all responsibility for the creation of the tragic consequences. Beyond the details on the manner in which Palestinians had to leave this or that village, one must simply acknowledge that the tragedy would not have occurred had the Zionists never arrived in Palestine. If the

Jews at the end of the nineteenth century had not embarked on a project of reassembling the Jewish people in their “promised land,” all the refugees languishing in the camps would still be living in the villages from which they fled or were expelled. Second, one must realize that when people flee out of fear and terror their flight is hardly voluntary. The massacre of Deir Yassin and a number of other atrocities provided ample cause for fright and flight, even if, with hindsight, we know these events to have been the exception rather than the rule.

Third, whatever the balance between flight and expulsion, one must admit that once the exodus got started—especially after the Arab invasion in May, when the Israelis had little to lose and it had become a zero-sum game—the Israelis did not shed too many tears and were glad to find, at the end of the war, that much of the land they had conquered was empty of its indigenous population, waiting for the hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants who began flocking into the country. And, indeed, Israel never allowed any significant number of refugees to return to their villages.

On this matter I have two personal memories. During Operation Yoav in October, when the Egyptian army withdrew from parts of the coastal plain, the Palestinian villagers joined it and fled toward the Gaza Strip. My company, sent to pursue the retreating forces, took control of half a dozen of these empty villages. As I came within range of a slightly hilly elevation some ten miles north of Gaza, I saw, far in the distance, several thousand of these wretched refugees trudging across the sand dunes. The departing Arabs nearest to me were more than three miles away, totally out of range of the weapons in my possession. Nevertheless, I positioned a machine gun on one of the hills and emptied a whole belt of bullets in their direction. Nobody could have been hurt, nor did I intend to hurt anyone. It was a symbolic act, a message to the Palestinians: now that you have left, there is no way back, you will have to stay away.

I also remember that somewhat later, when my company was still deployed near the Gaza Strip, I received information from my superiors that Palestinian refugees were perched on one of those sand dunes, intending to cross the lines and march back into the areas held by the Israeli army. I was ordered to stop them, even with fire if need be. I clearly remember being fully aware of the cruelty involved, but I would not have hesitated to open fire since by then I already understood that the struggle was not only for the establishment of our political sovereignty but also for the land. I also knew all too well that for the Arabs who had gambled on destroying our new state there could be no way back. It was

one thing to include in the Jewish state a large minority of Palestinians who peacefully accepted the UN resolution; it was quite another to bring back large numbers of Arabs who had declared all-out war on that same resolution and done their best to destroy us. This is why Israelis were, and still are, quite united around the conviction that under the new circumstances created by the war the return of large numbers of Palestinian refugees would destroy our ability to build the Jewish state to which we all aspired.

It can hardly be doubted that the Arab defeat in 1948 sharpened their rage against Zionism, but that rage was not created by the war. The revolutions that brought to power in the 1950s a young generation of leaders in most Arab states enabled them to blame the defeat on the corruption of the old regimes and their collusion with colonial powers. But such rationalization also blurred their vision, preventing them from accepting what had happened in 1948. Most of the new Arab rulers continued to dream of a "second round" in which they would have another chance to destroy Israel. This was not entirely irrational. The tremendous disparity in size between the sides and the new horizons opened by the pan-Arab movement, which for a while scored some impressive achievements, reinvigorated their hope to win the struggle against the Zionists. These factors, as well as the anger and insult that most Arabs felt after the 1948 defeat, fed their total resistance to accepting the verdict of history.

Under the leadership of David Ben-Gurion, most Israelis in the 1950s and early 1960s were ready to accept the territorial outcome of the 1948 war.<sup>14</sup> This meant giving up on parts of the Holy Land, including the Old City of Jerusalem and its holy sites. But they remained adamant about continuing the march of Zionism, that is, "ingathering the exiles" and settling them on the emptied lands. And this entailed a point-blank refusal to allow a significant number of Palestinian refugees to return. Refusal versus refusal spelt a deadlock that only force could settle. It spelt a deadlock that resulted in the continuation of bitter national strife for years to come.

To believe that the deadlock can be resolved by the clever diplomatic maneuvers of one side or the other is to underestimate the depth of the animosity. To assume that opportunities to make peace were missed because this side or the other did not come forward to meet an opportunity is to imply that history is no more than a chance of disconnected, arbitrary, and accidental events rather than a complex, often tragic web of profound human motivation, perception, and devotion. The desire of the New Historians to enlist historiography in the cause

of peace is morally praiseworthy, but it does not provide us with better historiography.<sup>15</sup>

My personal experiences, related in these pages, may have distorted my historic understanding. That remains for the reader to judge. I do hope, however, that my stories have also shown that Israel's collective memory is not as arbitrary as some historians and sociologists would have us think.

## NOTES

This article is an edited and somewhat expanded version of the Hebrew original, published under the title "Zikhronot Tashah" [Memories of 1948] in the festschrift *Dvarim le-Yizhar* [For S. Yizhar], ed. Nitza Ben-Ari (Tel Aviv, 1996). For a fuller treatment of collective memory, see M. Bar-On, "Lizkor u-le-hazkir" [Remembering and Reminding], in M. Bar-On, *Gvulot 'Asheinin* [Smoking Borders] (Jerusalem, 2001).

1. For a good survey of these dynamics, see M. Azaryahu, *Pulhanei Medina, Hagigot ha-'Atzma'ut, ve-Hantzahat ha-Noflim* Be-Yisrael, 1948–56 [State Rituals, Independence Celebrations, and Commemorating the Fallen in Israel, 1948–56] (Sede Boker, 1995). See also I. Shamir, "Andartot La-Noflim Be-Ma'arkhot Yisrael: Hantzaha ve-Zikaron" [Monuments to the Fallen in Israel's Wars: Commemoration and Memory], PhD diss., Tel Aviv University, 1994.

2. For one such protagonist, see S. Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* (London and New York, 1987). A similar approach may be found also in Noam Chomsky, *The Fateful Triangle: The U.S., Israel, and the Palestinians* (Boston, 1983), 94–99.

3. Elik was the younger brother of renowned novelist, Moshe Shamir, who ten years later wrote a book in his memory: *Pirkei Elik* [On Elik] (Merhavia, 1958).

4. See, for example, Y. Nimrod, *Breirat ha-Shalom ve-Derekh ha-Milhama: Hit'havut Defusim shel Yahasei Yisrael- 'Arav, 1947–50* [The Alternative of Peace and the Road of War: Emerging Patterns in Israel-Arab Relations, 1947–50] (Givat Haviva, 2000), 63–77.

5. Some of the details of this meeting were recorded in David Ben-Gurion, *Yoman ha-Milhama* [War Diary], ed. Gershon Rivlin and Elhanan Orren (Tel Aviv, 1982), 1:97–103.

6. David Ben-Gurion, *Be-Hilahem Am* [Nation at War] (Tel Aviv, 1950), 28–29.

7. Yaacov Nahmias and Efi Meltzer, eds., *Gdud Hamishim ve-Shnayim shel Hativat Giv'ati be-Milhemet ha-'Atzma'ut Tashah, 1948* [The Fifty-second Battalion of the Giv'ati Brigade in the 1948 War of Independence] (Tel Aviv, 2001), 67–71; Uri Milstein, *Toldot Milhemet ha-'Atzma'ut* [History of Israel's War of Independence], vol. 2.: *Ha-Hodesh ha-Rishon* [The First Month], 106–25.

8. David Ben-Gurion, *Yihud ve-Yi'ud* [Uniqueness and Destiny] (Tel Aviv, 1971), 29.

9. David Ben-Gurion, foreword to Yosef Ulitzki, *Mi-Meora'ot le-Milhama: Prakim be-Toldot ha-Haganah* [From Riots to War: Selected Episodes in the History of the Haganah] (Tel Aviv, 1950), 351.

10. On the late March crisis, see Milstein, *History*, vol. 4: *Mi-Mashber le-Hakhra 'a* [Out of Crisis Came Decision] (Tel Aviv, 1991), 49–140.
11. David Ben-Gurion, *Ba-Ma 'arkha* [In Battle] (Tel Aviv, 1949), vol. 4, p. 2, 288.
12. Quoted in Z. Sherf, *Shlosha Yamim* [Three Days] (Tel Aviv, 1959), 60.
13. Ezra Danin, *Tziyoni be-khol Tnai* [A Zionist without Conditions] (Jerusalem, 1987), 217.
14. On Ben-Gurion's policies in the 1950s, see M. Bar-On, "Status quo lifnei o aharei: Ikarei medinyut ha-bitahon shel Yisrael, 1949–1957" [Status Quo Before or After: Israel's Security Policy, 1949–1957], in Bar-On, *Smoking Borders*.
15. Some revisionist historians claim that Israel missed such opportunities during the 1950s and 1960s, but the issue is beyond the scope of this essay. See, for example, Flapan, *Birth*, 201–32. For a more critical treatment of this issue, see I. Rabinovich, *The Road Not Taken: Early Arab-Israeli Negotiations* (Oxford University Press, 1991).