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## Book Reviews

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# Untying the Palestinian 'Right of Return' Knot

by Harley Schlanger

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### **Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land Since 1948**

by Meron Benvenisti

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999

340 pages, hardcover

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It was the design of those who crafted the Oslo Accord for peace between Israel and the Palestinians to leave the most intractable matters to the end. Central to the agreement was that the first steps would be to reach compromises on trading "land for peace," and implementing a series of economic development projects which would provide material benefit to both the Israelis and the Palestinians. Achieving success in these two areas presumably would establish the trust required to resolve the more complex and emotional issues left for "Final Status" talks.

The two most problematic issues assigned to the "Final Status" talks were those of reaching an agreement on the status of Jerusalem, and resolving the refugee problem. The outbreak of the presently ongoing *Intifada II*, which was triggered by the ill-advised effort of President Clinton at the July Camp David summit to impose an agreement on Jerusalem on Barak and Arafat, demonstrates how explosive these remaining issues are, as more than 300, mostly Palestinians, have been killed in the fighting thus far. The second issue, the so-called "Right of Return," which addresses the plight of those Arabs who lost their land during the wars in 1947-48 and 1967, is the subject of the latest book by Meron Benvenisti, an Israeli author and historian, who once served as the Vice-Mayor of Jerusalem.

This issue, one discovers from reading this fascinating book, is as divisive and emotional for Israelis and Palestinians, as that of sovereignty over Jerusalem.

### **A Personal Journey**

It has been the policy of every Israeli government, since its founding in 1948, to reject any discussion of the return, to their towns and villages, of Arabs who had lived in those

towns and villages within the territory of British-controlled Palestine, before the mass exodus which occurred during the War of 1948. In 1972, Prime Minister Golda Meir tried to justify this policy, saying it was necessary to "avoid setting a precedent."

The result of this policy is that the more than 380,000 refugees who lost their homes from December 1947 to May 1948, were turned into non-citizens, with many living in abject poverty in refugee camps, while their land was incorporated into the Jewish homeland. By Israel's acting to "avoid a precedent," the defeated Arab population was humiliated, with the sense of loss, especially among those crowded into the camps, engendering the bitterness one sees etched on the faces of the youth engaged today in deadly battles with Israeli security forces. Many of the youth who have died during the *Intifada* are third- and fourth-generation residents of these camps, which still exist. The numbers of Palestinian refugees have, over more than a half-century, grown to the millions.

How difficult it must be for an Israeli who is committed to the peace process, to acknowledge that his father's life work, which appeared on the surface to consist of "innocent scientific excursions" to make new maps, was in reality key to consolidating Zionist claims to the land, by eliminating the evidence that Arabs had once lived there!

David Benvenisti, the author's father, was a leader of the team deployed by the government of Israel, shortly after the 1948 war, "to draw a Hebrew map of the land," to serve as "a renewed title deed" for Jews to take possession of Palestine. The stated goal of this effort, according to his son (the author), was to inculcate "his children and countless other young Israelis with the Zionist ethos of '*moledet*' (homeland): knowledge of its glorious Jewish past, intimate communion with its nature, and personal commitment to pioneering in collective agricultural settlements."

The technical part of this task involved giving Hebrew names to the towns and villages which had been inhabited by Arabs prior to their decisive defeat in 1948, by drawing new maps. In reality, the effect has been to successfully erase the old landscape, which had been dotted by more than 200 Arab villages. Map-making, Benvenisti points out, was used by the British as a special weapon for imposing colonial domination, and this tactic was borrowed by the Israelis. Reading present-day Israeli textbooks, he writes, creates an awareness of just "how close we are to the point when the vanished Arab landscape will be considered just a piece of Arab propaganda, a fabrication aimed at the destruction of Israel through incitement of 'The Return.'"

### **Sharing Sacred Landscape**

This subject is clearly one which troubles the author. His book is simultaneously an appeal for justice for the Palestinians, and an attempt to come to terms with the role his father—and Israel's Founding Fathers—played in creat-

ing obstacles to a just peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

It is also clear that this issue is one which unleashes intense emotions on both sides. The author is seeking a balance, one which assumes the "Right of Return" for the Jews to their homeland, while denying to those Zionist pioneers, the right to drive out the native populations they encountered there. The rejection by the Arabs of the flawed United Nations Partition Plan of 1947 made war inevitable, he argues, between the newly established Jewish state and the Arab world. And this war, which he describes as a violent inter-communal struggle, created the refugee crisis, which remains unresolved to this day.

Can this problem ever be resolved, when there is so much emotion and passion on each side? Benvenisti believes that Israelis must recognize that their actions in the war, which precipitated the refugee crisis, were not all justified, and he tackles some of the most difficult questions underlying this issue. For example, he devotes a chapter to the question of whether the Arabs left their homes willingly, or were driven out by Israeli aggression. Were the Israelis guilty of "ethnic cleansing"?

Though his answer will likely be unacceptable to most Israelis and Palestinians, he argues that there was no deliberate policy of ethnic cleansing in the early stages of the 1948 war, and that Arab refugees who were forced out were victims of military operations conducted in the midst of war. However, he minces no words in identifying specific instances that he believes bordered on ethnic cleansing.

For example, there was the massacre at Deir Yassin, on April 19, 1948, in which 254 Arab civilians were killed by fanatics of the Irgun and the Stern Gang (neither of which were recognized by the Israeli government or military). He writes, "Menachem Begin [a leader of Irgun] boasted that the panic that descended on the Arabs caused them to flee from the cities of Tiberias and Haifa as well. And indeed, the consequences of this barbaric act of ethnic cleansing were far-reaching. The Deir Yassin massacre, which was reported on over and over again in all the Arab media, inspired tremendous fear, which led many Arabs to abandon their homes as the Jewish forces drew near. There is no doubt that Deir Yassin was a turning point in the annals of the destruction of the Arab landscape."

Was it conscious policy of the Israeli leadership, of David Ben Gurion, to drive Arabs from the land? On this point, he admits, the evidence is not conclusive. The statements of Ben Gurion that he cites, indicate "contradictory positions." Ben Gurion "rejected a proposal for the systematic destruction of large numbers of villages, brought to him by Zionist activists." However, Ben Gurion also approved a policy, Plan D, which was an order to "take control of Arab villages and expel their inhabitants," though Benvenisti adds that there is no doubt that its objectives were military.

"One way or the other," he writes, "the Jewish state was

emptied of the overwhelming majority of its Arab inhabitants, who, according to the terms of the Partition Plan, were supposed to be full citizens of this state, with equal rights."

## A Just Solution

This is not an abstract, impersonal history, though at times the sheer density of "objective" material can be overwhelming. Instead, by writing it in this manner, Benvenisti offers the American reader an inside look at the wrenching emotional issues which confront people in Israel today, as they attempt to reconcile the contradictory nature of Zionism. It was a movement to offer Jews an opportunity to escape the anti-Semitism in Europe, and to live, free, in a "homeland," that would allow Jews to establish a nation in which they could fulfill the Biblical injunction to "be a blessing unto mankind." At the same time, that "homeland" was already a home to people who did not greet Jewish refugees with open arms.

In the Introduction, Benvenisti bares his anguish, which stems from this contradiction, to his readers: "Do we have a special responsibility, if only because we turned out to be the victors? What have we done to the vanquished enemy? Have we transformed a struggle for survival into an ethnic cleansing operation, sending another people to exile because we wanted to plunder their land?" Though the war we fought was cruel to both sides, "have we not actually prolonged the state of war so that we might suspend human values indefinitely?"

Finally, he asks, "How much compassion and guilt can I allow myself to express in order to pacify my troubled conscience, thereby exposing myself to accusations of betrayal on one side and hypocrisy on the other?"

After taking the reader through the history touched upon above, he offers his proposals for a just solution. First, he writes, it is necessary that there be a "symmetry of responsibility" accepted by both sides. For the Israelis, he cites a statement issued by Gen. Shlomo Gazit (ret.), who suggested that Israel make a declaration which contains "a moral and psychological acknowledgment recognizing the suffering of the Palestinians in the last fifty years."

But, recognition of the Palestinians as victims is not the basis for peace. What is necessary, he writes, is to provide economic justice to the Palestinians, in the form of providing water and electricity, schools, health care, and housing. In addition, he advocates that the government set aside funds from the lucrative sale of agricultural land to developers, to establish a fund to compensate the original Arab owners. Not only would this be "a righteous act," but "it might also signify that Israel was no longer evading its partial responsibility for the refugee problem."

This is a bold, important book, written by an Israeli who is serious about achieving a lasting peace with the Palestinians. It is only through an approach such as this, that the "Right of Return/refugee problem" of the Final Status talks in the Oslo Accord can be resolved.