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# Daniel Deronda *and the Tragedy of Zionism*

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A people can be blessed only by having counsellors and a multitude whose will moves in obedience to the laws of justice and love.

-Mordecai

God damn the Jews, they are just as bad as the rest of us.

-Mark Twain

## *The Ideal*

In 1947 when Israel became a state, each of the three major cities, Jerusalem, Haifa and Tel Aviv, had a street named for George Eliot. There were no other streets named for Victorian novelists, none for Dickens or Thackeray or Trollope, probably not even a Disraeli Street: only Eliot. The reason is not hard to find, apparent in two words, a name, a title, *Daniel Deronda*. This was Eliot's last novel (1878), certainly a departure from her previous realistic fiction, for here she depicted an idealized image of and argument for Zionism *avant la lettre*. The first use of the term "Zionism" occurred in 1890; the first Zionist Congress was held in Basel in 1897. She foreran them both. My initial concern here is how, by doing so, she achieved this remarkable distinction on the street maps of Israel, and subsequently what history has made of her vision.

The initial reaction to *Daniel Deronda* tended to be negative or puzzled, a far cry from the rapturous reception that had greeted her previous novel *Middlemarch*, considered then and even now by many

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the greatest of all English novels. The dissatisfaction with this last work stemmed mostly from its double plot, the two connected only—and too tenuously, ran the complaint—by the single presence in both of Deronda. What is usually called the Gwendolen Harleth plot tells of a young woman making a morally compromised marriage for material reasons, with tragic consequences; Deronda figures in her life as a moral compass to whom she turns for guidance and succor and whom she secretly loves. Readers wanted them to marry when she's widowed; they don't. Gwendolen is often considered Eliot's greatest, most psychologically complex character, her story compromised by the juxtaposition with the Mordecai plot, freighted with its obscure, alien mystico-Jewish matter. The critic F. R. Leavis took this dissatisfaction to the extreme, seriously suggesting that the bad (Jewish) half of the novel be excised and the good half be published as *Gwendolen Harleth*.

Deronda, the ward of the generous, gregarious Sir Hugo Mallinger, whose illegitimate child he assumes himself to be, knows nothing more of his origins and dares not ask, but receives the proper education of "an English gentleman," including a Cambridge degree.<sup>1</sup> Still, he feels somehow alien to the culture he moves in, discerning no position that would be right for him there. Rowing on the Thames one evening, he saves a young girl, Mirah, from drowning in a suicide attempt, discovers that she is Jewish and fleeing from an abusive father in search of her mother whom she believes to be in London. Deronda convinces the mother of a college friend to take Mirah in and sets out to find her mother or her brother. Thus he enters into the Jewish plot of the novel, where he plays a more significant role.

Before considering the unfolding of that story line, we must make a crucial distinction about Eliot's art. She is considered perhaps the pre-eminent exemplar of realism in English fiction (given that that term has many different aspects). But the Jewish or Mordecai section of *Daniel Deronda* is not realistic at all, unless one can accept the most extraordinary concatenation of coincidences imaginable to be plausible. Rather, a *telos* operates here, a providential hand guiding characters and events to unfold as they do. Such must be the case, as I want to show, for Mordecai's grand Zionist vision to have the authority and authenticity that Eliot invests in it.

While searching for Mirah's brother in the Jewish section of London, browsing in a bookstore, Deronda immediately encounters her brother,

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<sup>1</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (Waiheke Island, New Zealand: Floating Press, 2009), 318.

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although neither realizes it at the time, as he is using the name Mordecai, which is not the name for which Deronda is searching. One commentator writes that “by chance” they meet, but that’s exactly what it isn’t: it’s destiny, as was his rescuing Mirah from drowning. Even though Deronda tells Mordecai at the first meeting that he is not a Jew, Mordecai intuits otherwise. A columnist for *The New York Times* wrote recently of his mother’s World War II experience as a child in Italy, when a nun, seeing an SS man approaching, cloaked the little girl in her habit: the nun seemed to smell I was a Jew, she claimed. Mordecai seems to have this same olfactory sense: he knows Deronda is a Jew before Deronda does (as will, of course, any reasonably alert reader, the conventions of fiction being what they are). “I know it—I know it,” Mordecai cries only on intuition or faith; “what is my life else?”<sup>2</sup> Deronda’s mother, whom he has not yet met, was an apostate from her religion, in rebellion from her rigid, orthodox father. She gave up her son to Sir Hugo, presumably one of her lovers—she’d become a famous actress—to raise as an English gentleman, who would never know the social ignominy of being a Jew. (For me, she’s the most interesting character in the novel, but that’s another story.) Deronda, however, when she is dying, meets her for the only time when she reveals his lineage. He is elated, feeling that he now understands his true nature and purpose: he can now marry Mirah and become Mordecai’s spiritual and intellectual heir.

Mordecai has spent much of his life immersed in the study of Jewish history and theology, including, apparently, the Kabbalah with its belief in spiritual transmission from soul to soul. His, he says, “was a spiritual destiny embraced willingly.” “It was the soul fully born within me, and it came in my boyhood. It brought its own world—a mediaeval world where there are men who made the ancient language live again in new psalms of exile. . . . One of their souls was born again within me.”<sup>3</sup> Later he explains to Deronda—all this even before the revelation that Deronda really is a Jew: “In the doctrine of the Cabbala, souls are born again and again in new bodies till they are perfected and purified, and a soul liberated from a worn-out body may join the fellow-soul that needs it, that they may be perfected together, and their earthly work accomplished. . . . When my long-wandering soul is liberated from this weary body, it will join yours, and its work will be perfected. . . . I shall live in you. I shall live in you.”<sup>4</sup> When Deronda, still epistemologically uncircum-

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 919.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 913-14.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 986-7, 992.

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cised, agrees to do all he can to further his prophetic vision, Mordecai responds, “in a tone of quiet certainty which dispenses with further assurance. ‘You see it all—you are by my side on the mount of vision, and behold the paths of fulfilment which others deny.’”<sup>5</sup> Earlier, Mordecai tells that his faith had been mocked: “They said, ‘He feeds himself on visions,’ and I denied not; for visions are the creators and feeders of the world.”<sup>6</sup> His received vision from earlier souls, as he understands it, he now passes on to the younger, more dynamic Deronda, who willingly assumes responsibility for seeking to “perfect” this vision in reality, a proto-Zionist vision.

As her notebooks for the novel reveal, George Eliot seriously explored the literature and lore of Judaism in preparation for *Daniel Deronda*. Under the tutelage of a friend, Emmanuel Deutsch, she even learned Hebrew and immersed herself in its sacred texts. She knew whereof she wrote. Most of her readers, however, were mystified, unsure of the import of this part of the novel. At the simplest level, perhaps, it was assumed that she was making a plea for greater tolerance for Jews, a wider, more sympathetic understanding of them and their religion; but as noble a motive as that would be, it does not account for the esotericism and prophetic vision that permeates the Mordecai section. At the other extreme, some critics have suggested that Eliot used the image of a revived, vibrant Judaism as a critique of and inspiration for the reformation of the moribund, inert Christianity of her day, her concern more for England than Israel. This strikes me as a bridge too far: inspiring one nation per novel seems plenty. And what Eliot does, through Mordecai, is to seek to inspire Jews to a contra-diaspora, a realization of the prayer *Leshana Ha-baa b'Yerushalayim*—Next Year in Jerusalem.

The Jewish characters in *Daniel Deronda* are often criticized for being flat, unnuanced, a departure for Eliot. Compared to the tortured psyche of Gwendolen Harleth, Mirah Lapidoth appears monochromatically pallid, and even Deronda in his acolyte role seems to forfeit most of his psychological complexity. But the real problem on this score resides in Mordecai, who serves as a mouthpiece more than a person: he has, from a novelistic viewpoint, no redeeming flaws. Some years earlier Eliot had written to a friend who was urging her to write a novel depicting the achievement of an ideal Comtean Positivist society, explaining why she couldn't. “I think aesthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching because it deals with life in its highest complexity. But if it ceases to be purely

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 987.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 913.

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aesthetic—if it lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram—it becomes the most offensive of all teaching.”<sup>7</sup> Utopias, on the other hand, do not offend us, she continues, because we understand them to be expository diagrams, not depictions of life; but novels that lecture in that manner fail aesthetically to replicate the complexity of real life. One could almost take this as Eliot’s artistic credo, but with Mordecai she eschews it, substituting diagram (abstract argument) for picture.

In the last essay in her final book, “The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!” in *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such*—the essay’s odd title reflects an anti-Jewish cry supposedly employed in the Crusades and the name given to a series of anti-Jewish riots which broke out in Germany in 1819—Eliot offers a detailed, eloquent, and persuasive argument in favor of the establishment of a Jewish state in the Holy Land—and, to repeat, before any Zionist movement or organization. In narratology, the point is often stressed that not only does no character necessarily speak for the author, but that even the narrator need not be assumed to; a comparison of this essay with the arguments made by Mordecai, however, erases any doubt that he speaks for the author. The problem she faced was how to condense 25 pages of essay into a few pages of novel.

Her solution, from the novelistic viewpoint, proves not very satisfactory, at least per the canons of realism. At a tavern, Mordecai meets with a group of working men who call themselves The Philosophers, to discuss the great issues of the day. One night, he takes Deronda with him—still the ethnically in-the-dark Deronda—to hear him expound on the destiny of the Jews. This was not the specific agenda for the evening, but so monomaniacal and insistent is Mordecai that they spend the entire evening on that topic. I would not want to run afoul of cultural historians by suggesting that a disparate group of Victorian laborers, each with a different profession, would be unlikely to meet over drinks to discuss, say, the theory of evolution or the fate of Russian serfs, but only that Mordecai seems an unlikely member: he has one and only one interest, could speak on one and only one subject, but speak on that he does, at length, and all acquiesce. As readers, we may feel we have been set up. Yet, in his defense, he can be stirring.

My problem now is how to present Mordecai’s arguments in a way that will explain the three streets being named after Eliot in Israel: not easy to do without extensive quotation. First, I will point out that there are two other Jews among The Philosophers, both skeptical of and resis-

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<sup>7</sup> George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954), 4: 300.

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tant to his claims (in this regard, like most accommodationist Jews' view of Zionism in its beginning). "I'm a rational Jew," says one. "I am for getting rid of all of our superstitions and exclusiveness. There's no reason now why we shouldn't melt gradually into the populations we live among."<sup>8</sup> The whole notion of national exclusiveness such as Mordecai advocates, argues another, is dying out: "The whole current of progress is setting against it."<sup>9</sup> A few extended passages are necessary to demonstrate the passion of his religious-cum-political beliefs in countering their skepticism.

[T]he soul of Judaism is not dead. Revive the organic centre: let the unity of Israel which has made the growth and form of its religion to be an outward reality. Looking toward a land and a polity, our dispersed people in all the ends of the earth may share the dignity of a national life which has a voice among the peoples of the East and the West—which will plant the wisdom and skill of our race so that it may be, as of old, a medium of transmission and understanding.<sup>10</sup>

There is a store of wisdom among us to found a new Jewish polity, grand, simple, just, like the old—a republic where there is equality of protection, an equality which shone like a star on the forehead of our ancient community, and gave it more than the brightness of Western freedom amid the despotisms of the East. . . . And the world will gain as Israel gains. For there will be a community in the van of the East which carries the culture and the sympathies of every great nation in its bosom: there will be a land set for a halting-place of enmities, a neutral ground for the East as Belgium is for the West.<sup>11</sup>

I seek nothing for [the Jewish nation], but the good which promises good to all the nations. The spirit of our religious life, which is one with our national life, is not hatred of aught but wrong. The Master has said, an offence against man is worse than an offence against God. . . . Our national life was a growing light. Let the central fire be kindled again, and the light will reach afar. The degraded and scorned of our race will learn to think of their sacred land . . . as a republic where the Jewish spirit manifests itself in a new order founded on the old, purified and enriched by the experience our greatest sons have gathered from the life of the ages. . . . The Messianic time is the time when Israel shall will the planting of the national ensign. . . . Let us . . . choose our full heritage, claim the brotherhood of our nation, and carry into it a new brotherhood with the nations of the Gentiles. The vision is there; it will be fulfilled.<sup>12</sup>

Only a small portion of Mordecai's disquisition, these excerpts

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<sup>8</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 963-4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 961.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 973-4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 978.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 982-3.

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should give something of the nature and spirit of his argument for the establishment of a Jewish state in what was then still a part of the Ottoman Empire. (He makes the passing suggestion that rich Jews could buy up some of the land.) Deronda bolsters his friend's proposal by noting the recent unification of Germans and Italians, previously split in separate polities, a development that Eliot stresses in her parallel essay. One can easily see, then, why Jewish readers evinced a far more favorable opinion of *Daniel Deronda* than did most readers. Typical might be this contemporary paean in *George Eliot and Judaism* by the German theologian David Kaufmann: "It is to an English Christian authoress that the historian of culture must assign the glory of having grasped these ideas most profoundly, and of having perceived with the prophetic eye of genius the proper moment for answering the fundamental questions of Judaism, and investing them with poetic charm."<sup>13</sup>

The denouement of *Daniel Deronda* depicts Daniel and Mirah married, along with the gravely ill Mordecai, setting out for the Holy Land to begin work, very vaguely limned, at fulfilling Mordecai's vision. He dies along the way, never reaching the soil he held sacred. Critics often want to adduce biblical parallels here: he is John the Baptist to Deronda's Messiah (although that rather scrambles religions) or, maybe apter, Moses to Deronda's Joshua, leading like Moses but never reaching. Mordecai had explained to Deronda that his being raised as an English gentleman and more familiar with the ways of the great world and how its power structures work rendered him a much better facilitator of their vision than a poor itinerant watchmaker could be. The Moses parallel might, in this regard, be better drawn to Deronda: Moses having been raised at the court of Pharaoh, as his daughter's child, may have equipped him all the better to negotiate the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, as Deronda's education as an English gentleman may make him all the more effective as a leader. But Deronda's messianic role, as Mordecai's soul meshes with his, creates an unacknowledged novelistic anomaly. This new hope of his race, carrier now of all its aspirations to statehood, has never been in a synagogue except as a tourist, has never been bar mitzvahed, never attended a Seder dinner, never sat shiva, never even been circumcised (given his widowed mother's insistence that he know nothing of his heritage). In short, he has nothing of the lived experience of being a Jew, experiences nothing in his person of their suffering. What kind of national leader can this make? But having couched his destiny in a novel,

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<sup>13</sup> David Kaufmann, *George Eliot and Judaism: An Attempt to Appreciate Daniel Deronda*, trans. J. W. Ferrier. (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1877), 20.

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with its specific narrative demands, Eliot burkes “realistic” issues like these and sends Deronda on his way as a savior.

### *The Reality*

The nineteenth century proved the great age of utopian thinking and planning, of imaginary ideations of societies radically better than the real ones, of a world purified and transformed. These utopias were many, varied, expressive of every sort of ideology, embodying all sorts of hopes of all sorts of people. The most famous and apparently most persuasive of them all was Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888) with the prediction of the author “that the dawn of the new era is already near at hand, and that the full day will swiftly follow.”<sup>14</sup> Theodor Herzl, initially dismissive of utopias as pipe-dreams like Marx, in 1902 came to write a Zionist one of his own, *Altneuland* (Old-New Land) which forms an instructive diptych with Mordecai’s vision in *Daniel Deronda*. But the twentieth century, by ironic contrast, became the dystopian century, made by its history more fearful than hopeful of the future. The rise of totalitarian regimes with putatively utopian pretensions called the genre into doubt. As early as 1932, Aldous Huxley had appended as epigraph to *Brave New World* a comment by the Russian émigré philosopher Nicolai Berdyaev that became the dystopist’s credo: “Utopias are realizable. Life is moving toward a utopia. And perhaps a new age is beginning, an age in which the intellectuals and the cultivated class will dream of avoiding utopia and of returning to a society that is, less ‘perfect’ but more free.”<sup>15</sup> So dire had the history of the twentieth century proved that the philosopher Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* traced the totalitarian implications of utopian thinking all the way back to Plato’s *Republic*, bringing even that work into post-World War II question; by the century’s end, the novelist Martin Amis claimed all utopias had come to look like dystopias.

This is familiar territory, how history has changed the way we understand this idealistic literature. My attempt now will be to consider the parallel way in which the history of the last seven decades influences the way we evaluate the idealistic proto-Zionism of *Daniel Deronda*. In all of Mordecai’s lengthy disquisition to The Philosophers, he makes one passing mention of what will become a crucial flashpoint of the Zionist enterprise: he indicates that certain Jews “have wealth enough to re-

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<sup>14</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 195.

<sup>15</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: Harper, 1965), 187-8.



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deem the soil from debauched and paupered conquerors"<sup>16</sup>—that is, the people living there. This indicates his only awareness that the Holy Land is already inhabited. Perhaps he means the Turks who control (what will come to be called) Palestine as part of the Ottoman Empire, the conquerors; or the actual Arabs who live there, paupered perhaps, but hardly debauched; or some muddled conflation of both. And while there were sporadic efforts by some wealthy Jews to buy land in Palestine, it was hardly enough to constitute a nation.

In 1880, the population of Palestine was 600,000, almost entirely Arab. While the Earl of Shaftsbury coined the phrase "A people without land for a land without people," it became the mantra of Zionists and those who endorsed their nationalist aspirations, ignoring or devaluing the native population. At least from the time of the Balfour Declaration in 1917, an attempt to gain Zionist support for Britain's war effort by promising Jews a homeland in Palestine, the role of this population was minimized and distorted for propaganda purposes. Theories that they would welcome an influx of Jews because of the wealth and progress it would bring—the scenario of Herzl's *Altneuland*, for instance—were immediately disproven; and the hope of the Cultural—as opposed to the Political—Zionists for a binational state with shared ethnic powers was a nonstarter, for both Jews and Arabs. The decades between the two World Wars in the Middle East were rife with promises made to be broken, that were, with equivocations, betrayals, willful self-serving illusions, in much of which the Zionist enterprise was enmeshed.

If one dismisses the propaganda of that era for what it is, the most honest and accurate analysis of the situation proves to be Vladimir Jabotinsky's 1923 essay "The Iron Wall: We and the Arabs." I will quote from it at some length to compare his realistic view of what lay ahead for Israel with Mordecai's hyper-idealized visionary one. "That the Arabs of the Land of Israel should willingly come to an agreement with us is beyond all hopes and dreams at present, and in the foreseeable future. . . . Apart from those who have been virtually 'blind' since childhood, all the other moderate Zionists have long since understood that there is not even the slightest hope of ever obtaining the agreement of the Arabs of the Land of Israel to 'Palestine' becoming a country with a Jewish majority."<sup>17</sup> He appeals to world history. If a reader "should attempt to seek but one instance of a country settled [by foreigners] with the consent of those

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<sup>16</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 977-8.

<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Jabotinsky, "The Iron Wall: We and the Arabs," *The Jewish Herald*, November 26, 1937.

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born there he will not succeed. The inhabitants . . . have always put up a stubborn fight.”<sup>18</sup> Among other instances, he cites the “redskins” of North America—and what happened to them. “Any native people . . . views their country as their national home, of which they will always be the complete masters. They will not voluntarily allow, not only a new master, but even a new partner. And so it is for the Arabs.”<sup>19</sup>

Jabotinsky dismisses the idea that the Arabs are “a rabble ready to be bribed in order to sell out their homeland” for some technological upgrades.<sup>20</sup> “This view is absolutely groundless. Individual Arabs may perhaps be bought off but this hardly means that all the Arabs in Eretz Israel are willing to sell” their patrimony.<sup>21</sup> “Every indigenous people will resist alien settlers as long as they see any hope of ridding themselves of the danger of foreign settlement. That is what the Arabs in Palestine are doing, and what they will persist in doing as long as there remains a solitary spark of hope that they will be able to prevent the transformation of ‘Palestine’ into the ‘Land of Israel.’”<sup>22</sup> At this point—1923—Zionists are agitating mostly for unlimited immigration, not openly for a nation-state, but the Arabs are not fools: they are being colonized. “Colonization itself has its own explanation, integral and inescapable, and understood by every Arab and every Jew with his wits about him. Colonization can have only one goal. For the Palestinian Arabs this goal is inadmissible.”<sup>23</sup> Edward Said, in an important essay on this subject, argues that the ideology and racial assumptions that characterize nineteenth-century colonization in Africa and Asia were at work in the Zionist enterprise as well, including the denigration of native populations that is used to justify their subjugation.<sup>24</sup> But in the post-World War I world, colonialization was on the descent, not the ascent, with at least some consideration given to the self-determination of peoples in the Wilsonian agenda for reconstruction. “Self-determination,” he declared, “is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril.”<sup>25</sup> Zionists had to swim against this current—could

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Said, “Zionism from the Standpoint of the Victims,” *The Edward Said Reader*, ed. Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrea Rubin (Vintage, 2000), 126.

<sup>25</sup> Woodrow Wilson, “Address of the President of the United States Delivered at a Joint Session of the Two Houses of Congress,” February 11, 1918.

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and did, employing all the old ideological justifications for colonialism.

Jabotinsky continues: The voluntary agreement of Arabs to Jewish dominance is—

out of the question. . . . Zionist colonization, even the most restricted, must either be terminated or carried out in defiance of the native population. This colonization can, therefore, continue and develop only under the protection of a force independent of the local population—an iron wall which the native population cannot break through. This is, in toto, our policy toward the Arabs. To formulate it any other way would only be hypocrisy.<sup>26</sup>

The iron wall must consist, he argues, of bayonets, that is, brute force. For the nonce, the bayonets of the British Mandatory might suffice, but ultimately we prefer “an iron wall of Jewish bayonets.”

[I]f anyone objects that this point of view is immoral, I answer: It is not true; either Zionism is moral and just or it is immoral and unjust. But that is a question that we should have settled before we became Zionists. . . . We hold that Zionism is moral and just. And since it is moral and just, justice must be done, no matter whether Joseph or Simon or Ivan or Achmet agree with it or not. There is no other morality.<sup>27</sup>

Jabotinsky was not alone in this view; Lord Balfour declared: “In Palestine we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country. . . . Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.”<sup>28</sup> Jabotinsky later wrote, “The messiah will not come in the figure of the poor man riding on a donkey. The messiah will come, like all messiahs, riding on a tank.”<sup>29</sup> It comes as no surprise that Jabotinsky was a great admirer of Mussolini.

Jabotinsky provides no specifics of how exactly Jewish bayonets would be deployed, but let me propose one set forth in a 1949 novella by S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, which became an immediate sensation in Israel, considered by Jews a Hebrew masterpiece. It tells the story of a group of young Israeli soldiers sent, in the last months of the 1948 war, to demolish an Arab village, Khirbet Khizeh, and drive its inhabitants into exile. The event is narrated by one of the soldiers:

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<sup>26</sup> Jabotinsky, “The Iron Wall: We and the Arabs.”

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Memorandum by Lord Arthur Balfour to Lord George Curzon quoted in “Origins and Evolution of the Palestine Problem (Part I),” United Nations website, accessed on September 1, 2022. <https://www.un.org/unispal/history2/origins-and-evolution-of-the-palestine-problem/part-i-1917-1947/>

<sup>29</sup> Jabotinsky quoted in John B. Judis, *Genesis: Truman, American Jews, and the Origins of the Arab/Israeli Conflict* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014), 90.

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True, it all happened a long time ago, but it has haunted me ever since. I sought to drown it out with the din of passing time, to diminish its value, to blunt its edge with the rush of daily life. . . . But sometimes I would shake myself again, astonished at how easy it had been to be seduced, to be knowingly led astray and join the general mass of liars—that mass compounded of crass ignorance, utilitarian indifference, and shameless self-interest—and exchange a single great truth for the cynical shrug of a hardened sinner. I saw that I could no longer hold back . . . I should, rather, start telling the story.<sup>30</sup>

The narration is remarkable, apparently dazzling in Hebrew, according to the afterward by David Shulman, in revealing the psychological trauma experienced by the soldier as his justifications disintegrate with the destruction of simple homes, the terrorizing of old men, the slaughter of animals, the expelling of women and children, weeping, into exile. “Something struck me like lightning. All at once everything seemed to mean something different, more precisely: exile. This was exile. This was what exile looked like.”<sup>31</sup> He had been used to associating exile with the Jews, who suffered so much of it; now Jews were the exilers, doing to others what had been done to them.

His conclusion:

I had a single, set idea, like a hammered nail, that I could never be reconciled to anything, so long as the tears of a weeping child still glistened as he walked along with his mother, who furiously fought back her soundless tears, on his way into exile, bearing with him a roar of injustice and such a scream that—it was impossible that no one in the world would gather that scream in when the moment came—and then I said to Moishe: “We have no right, Moishe, to kick them out of here!”<sup>32</sup>

While *Khirbet Khizeh* is fiction, the self-discovery of one man’s moral insight, the kind of event it chronicles was in fact all too common, as the work of Israel’s New Historians—puncturing the myths of immaculate conception—demonstrates. Benny Morris’s exhaustive account of the first Arab-Israeli War, *1948*, cites many examples of Arabs forced to flee their villages and subsequently—part of Israeli policy—never allowed to return. Morris revealed that declassified documents showed that “in the months of April and May 1948, units of the Haganah were given operational orders that stated explicitly that they were to uproot the villagers, expel them and destroy the villages,” which came to include 24 deliber-

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<sup>30</sup> S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, trans. Nicholas De Lange (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, [1949] 2014), 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

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ate massacres of unarmed civilians.<sup>33</sup> An even more damning examination of the actual historical record, found in Norman G. Finkelstein's *Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict*, reveals that expulsion and refusal of the right to return were de facto Israeli policies and tactics from the beginning of the war, if not before.<sup>34</sup> 750,000 homeless Palestinians resulted. Jabotinsky, it seems obvious, would have approved this particular use of Jewish bayonets to build an iron wall, as well as most Israeli policies toward the Arabs since.

Shulman, an American émigré to Israel, recounts in his afterward of standing with a village of Arabs and a few sympathetic Israelis against a party of Jewish settlers "intent on terrorizing these people and driving them off the land."<sup>35</sup> This was in 2007. Such expulsions remain common, particularly in the Occupied Territories resulting from the 1967 War, a result that some more thoughtful Israelis see as a bane for their nation. Numerous United Nations' Resolutions have condemned this illegal appropriation of land to no avail. "Of one such resolution in 2016, passed in the Security Council unanimously (14-0, U. S. abstaining), one activist tweeted that in all likelihood, Israel will expand the seizure of Palestinian land and construction of settlements just to thumb its nose at the UN and to demonstrate its irrelevance when it comes to the Occupation."<sup>36</sup> In their massive examination of this issue, *Lords of the Land*, Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar note, "Deception, shame, concealment, denial and repression have characterized the state's behavior with respect to the flow of funds to the settlements"; and conclude that, as a result of this policy, Israel has become "less democratic, less humane, less rational, and at the same time poorer, more divided, and more hateful."<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, can anything demonstrate better than this continuing illegal policy the acted-on belief in Jabotinsky's contention that, if it serves Zionism, it is moral? "There is no other morality."

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with Benny Morris quoted in *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, eds. Ahmad H. Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod (New York: Columbia University Press, ), 31.

<sup>34</sup> See Norman G. Finkelstein, *Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, 112.

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.tikkun.org/why-security-council-resolution-2334-matters-a-lot-more-than-we-think/>

<sup>37</sup> Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar, *Lords of the Land: The War Over Israel's Settlements in the Occupied Territories, 1967-2007* (New York: Nation Books, 2007), xxi, xviii.

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### *Why the Two Can't Meet*

If now, in light of what the real Israel has become, we look back at Mordecai's vision in *Daniel Deronda* of what it could become—should become—the result is a kind of shame and deep embarrassment. Phrases like these—“Israel is the heart of mankind . . . [with] tenderness . . . to the poor and weak”<sup>38</sup>; “There is [a] store of wisdom among us to found a new Jewish polity, grand, simple, just . . . a republic where there is equality of protection”<sup>39</sup>; “there will be a community in the van of the East which carries the culture and the sympathies of every great nation in its bosom . . . a land set for a halting-place of enmities”<sup>40</sup>; “The spirit of our religious life, which is one with our national life, is not hatred of aught but wrong. The Master has said, an offense against man is worse than an offence against God.”<sup>41</sup> These not only ring hollow but with the retrospect of history sound like a con man trying to sell vacation real estate in Florida that we know to be a swamp. That is unfair to Mordecai, of course, who did not know it would be a swamp. He was selling hope, faith, prophetic vision, not Menachem Begin, Ariel Sharon, and Benjamin Netanyahu.

Even posing the ideation against the reality may seem unfair, but how else to gauge the ideation? In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes, “all idealism is a falsehood in the face of necessity.”<sup>42</sup> When, then, in 1947 the United Nations voted to establish the State of Israel in a land already populated by another, hostile people, Zionist idealism was doomed to falsification by historical necessity. A law of physics holds that two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time: historical-political physics follows the same law. Mordecai's sort of religious vision had necessarily to be jettisoned in favor of Jabotinsky's *realpolitik*, replete with lots of Jewish bayonets, to occupy that space. No historical tragedy was ever more *deliberately*, if blindly, set in motion.

Jabotinsky and others argued correctly that such was simply the way of the world—how other stronger people came to dominate lesser, “inferior” ones: the European settlers over the Indians in North America; the Spaniards and Portuguese over the natives in South America; the English over the Aborigines in Australia and New Zealand; the Boers over the native South Africans. In the case of the United States, this was

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<sup>38</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 970.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 978.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 982.

<sup>42</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, The Twilight of the Gods*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 99.

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done in clear contradiction of Jefferson's principle that all men are created equal, which we professed to cherish, as the natives were despoiled and displaced and millions of others held in slavery.<sup>43</sup> While the Israelis' policies are thus hardly a historical anomaly and certainly not the worst (the Australians had wiped out the entire Aborigine population of Tasmania by 1876), they have the misfortune of operating in a changed time, with somewhat more world-wide sympathy with oppressed people of color. Americans could "win the West" with the credo that the only good Indian is a dead Indian, while even the crudest Likudnik would hesitate to pronounce aloud that the only good Arab is a dead Arab. As South Africa was struggling in the eyes of the world to dismantle a system of apartheid, Israel moved toward establishing one. World-wide communication, too, is so immediate and the graphics so compelling, despite all the regime can do to stifle the flow of information, that the Iron Wall of propaganda seems increasingly porous. I think of that historical analogue a century earlier when King Leopold of Belgium—at least in Mark Twain's excoriating exposé, *King Leopold's Soliloquy*—damns the Kodak, a new technology, for tearing away the veil of propaganda and deceit that hid his crimes of exploitation and destruction in the Congo from the world: "The only witness I couldn't bribe."<sup>44</sup>

But today's moral censure of Israel may stem in some large part from the realization that the rest of the world was complicit in this tragedy of good intentions. Israel did not come into being as the result of some biblical promise of God to the Jews. It came into being because of a vote in the United Nations. Hitler, the Holocaust, and the domestic politics of Harry Truman: these were the prime movers. Whether knowing what lay ahead would have altered that vote remains an interesting, albeit academic, question.

Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) believed romantic literary works could have pernicious consequences if, in their idealism, they were unconnected to reality. Claes Ryn, in his Introduction to Babbitt's *Rousseau and Romanticism* (originally published in 1919), explains: "Poets [i.e., writers] whose imaginations are insufficiently anchored in moral experience can draw us into dangerous illusions. . . . Nothing could be more important to the welfare of human society than that its members can distinguish between visions that are merely enthralling and ones that are enthralling

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<sup>43</sup> For a devastating review of this process, see Peter Nabokov, "The Intent Was Genocide," *The New York Review of Books*, July 2, 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Mark Twain, *King Leopold's Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule*, 2nd ed. (Boston: P.R. Warren, 1905), 39-40.

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and rooted in reality.”<sup>45</sup> Eliot, in the Mordecai portions of *Daniel Deronda*, offers the kind of alluring vision unmoored in reality: it comes purely from books, untested by actual experience. Ironically, the distinction she drew, noted earlier, between the novel as a genre that depicts the nuanced, complex fullness of life and the utopian—an abstract vision of what one hopes might be, but is not “real”—exposes the fundamental weakness of her last work, at least in the embedded proto-Zionist vision.

Eliot makes no attempt to show Deronda and his wife actually entering the Holy Land, to try in any way to effect Mordecai’s vision: in truth, she could not. What they would have found there in no way corresponds to conditions conducive to the realization of Mordecai’s grand political apotheosis: not an empty land awaiting Jewish redemption, but one with an entrenched population needing no messiah. Probably many of the early Zionist schemata offered idealized depictions parallel to Mordecai’s of what awaited there, but history proved them wrong. A work like S. Yizhar’s *Khirbet Khizeh*, discussed above, proves a far more moral work in exposing theory to fact, rootless idealization to on-the-ground reality. Like Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, say, the moral awakening of a single individual, vivid enough, dramatic enough, suffices to expose the hypocrisy of an entire civilization. *Daniel Deronda*, by contrast, in offering encouragement and validation of early Zionist efforts—those three Israeli streets named for George Eliot—could well be thought to have drawn some into such “dangerous illusions.”

### *Coda*

Eliot probably chose the name Mordecai for her character because of the biblical role he played in saving the Jews as chronicled in the Book of Esther and celebrated in the Feast of Purim. The story, in brief, recounts the plot of Haman, chief minister of King Ahasuerus, to have all the Jews in his empire (from India to Ethiopia) exterminated because the chief Jew Mordecai refuses to bow down before him. The king agrees, issuing such an edict. Unbeknownst to the king or Haman, the much beloved young wife of the king, Esther, is a Jew, the cousin of Mordecai. When, at his urging, she reveals this truth to the king, he is infuriated with Haman, has him hanged, and revokes the edict to destroy the Jews. Mordecai thus saves his people, becomes chief minister himself, and gets a feast celebrated each year in his honor.

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<sup>45</sup> Claes G. Ryn, “Introduction” *Rousseau and Romanticism* by Irving Babbitt (New York: Routledge, 2017), lv.



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However, in his new role, Mordecai is given the power to issue commands, writing in the king's name. As the King James version renders it: "Wherein the king granted the Jews which were in every city to gather themselves together, and to stand for their life, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish all the power of the people and province that would assault them, both little ones and women, and to take the spoil of them for a prey. . . . Thus the Jews smote all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, and slaughter, and destruction, and did what they would unto those that hated them."<sup>46</sup> The toll is given as seventy-five thousand slain.

Eliot's Mordecai can be seen, probably was meant to be seen, as an avatar of the biblical Mordecai, as a servant-savior of his people; but the implication of stage-two Mordecai, the avenger, messiah on a tank, appears, of course, nowhere in the novel, but is left for history to reveal.

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<sup>46</sup> Esther 8:11 and 9:5 (Authorized King James Version).