



The Israeli Declaration of Independence: “A Camel Is a Horse Produced by a Committee”

Jay Harris

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/jtr>



Part of the Jewish Studies Commons

THE ISRAELI DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE: "A CAMEL IS A HORSE PRODUCED BY A COMMITTEE"

JAY HARRIS

Harvard University

"A camel is a horse produced by a committee." This admittedly trite saying was the first thing that came to mind in revisiting the Israeli declaration of independence. It is a document that stands in considerable internal tension, replete with a series of self-justifications that reflect the historical disputes within the Zionist movement. It offers a wide range of claims supporting the right of Jews to independence within the land of Israel, but seems not to notice that these claims are not fully compatible one with another, and in some cases seem quite far from the liberationist rhetoric of the Zionist movement. One confronts within the document different readings of Jewish history; this is particularly significant since history, not political theory, has been and remains the primary justification for Zionism and the Jewish state.

First, some background. The declaration, read by David Ben-Gurion on May 14, 1948, was prepared by a range of hands, starting with a first draft prepared by Zvi Berenson, which was developed further by a committee that included Moshe Shertok (Sharett), David Remez, Pinhas

Rosenblueth (Rosen), Moshe Shapira, and Aharon Zisling. The initial draft stated that the boundaries of the state would be those established by the UN partition resolution of November 29, 1947. The inclusion of this was rejected by the larger committee charged with approving the draft by a vote of 5-4. (It was explicitly noted that the US Declaration of Independence did not designate its borders.) The final wording was entrusted to another committee, which included Ben-Gurion, Rabbi Fishman (Maimon), Zisling and Shertok. This version was accepted by the National Council, established by the Zionist General Council, after considerable debate.

The declaration consists of three parts: a series of historical arguments (10 paragraphs); the actual declaration of the establishment of the state (1 paragraph); a series of political arrangements and enumeration of the political rights of the citizens of this newly declared state (7 paragraphs). This is followed by a closing paragraph, which opens with the heavily debated phrase, "with trust in the rock of Israel", giving location and date, and followed by the signatures of the 37 members of the National Council. In what follows, I shall consider only the opening 10 paragraphs.

The three opening paragraphs in the official English version read:

1. Eretz Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.
2. After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and to the restoration in it of their political freedom.
3. Impelled by this historic (sic) and traditional attachment, Jews strove in every successive generation to re-establish themselves in their ancient homeland. In recent decades they returned in their masses (sic). (The Hebrew reads, "u-ve-dorot ha-aharonim shavu le-artsam be-hamonim.) Pioneers, ma`apilim and defenders, they made deserts bloom, revived the Hebrew language, built villages and towns, and created a thriving community, controlling its own economy and culture, loving peace but knowing how to defend itself, bringing the blessings of progress to all the

country's inhabitants, and aspiring towards independent nationhood (atsma'ut mamlakhtit).

These paragraphs open the historical argument establishing the right of the Jews to independent existence in the land of Israel. They incorporate what was, by 1948, a central topos of much (not all) Zionist discourse, namely that all Jewish spiritual, religious and political creativity was nurtured by the land. This effort at "shelilat ha-golah" is immediately attached to what was a standard, modern galut strategy of self-justification, namely the Jewish "contribution" to universal civilization. For modern European and American Jews, this "contribution" served to justify the demand for acceptance and integration. The declaration turns this strategy on its head, suggesting that the true Jewish "contribution" is a product of the land. Jews can, it is implied, best continue to "contribute" by reestablishing themselves in their land.

Now, I do not wish to dwell here, or in what follows, on what are at best historical exaggerations and in some cases distortions. That the Bible was not in its entirety a product of the land (whether one adopts a critical or traditional stance on the questions regarding authorships), and that it was not a literary creation of a single people, is known to all. This line of inquiry is not interesting to me. What people, after all is without its myths? Committed diasporists are certainly no different in their manipulation of the data of Jewish history. Rather, what is striking to me is that in this most fundamental of documents, the Zionist leaders begin their case with the "fact" that the Jews have bequeathed (Heb., "horish") to the world the eternal Book of Books. The idea that Jews "gave" or "bequeathed" this book represents a very peculiar view of culture, one, of course not distinct to Zionism or even Jews, as Thomas Cahill's recent book demonstrates. The "Book of Books" was not produced to be "given" to the world; nor, for that matter, has Jewish (=rabbinic) tradition looked on the wide dissemination of the biblical texts as a good thing. But, leaving this matter aside, we must ask what does the "fact" that Jews have "given" the Bible to the world have to do with the declaration of independence? It seems to me that not even the most committed of Zionists have succeeded in emancipating themselves from the self-destructive notion that Jews must

justify themselves in terms of the benefits that accrue to others from their existence. That the authors of the declaration sought to manipulate this degrading line of thought for their own political purposes (as did the most committed of German-Jewish diasporists, and as do all who pursue it) does not diminish its peculiarity within an overtly nationalist movement.

Having “established” that the land is the nourishing source of all Jewish national and universal cultural productivity, the declaration goes on to “establish” that the attachment to the land was permanent feature of Jewish culture even after (the only partially correct claim that) the Jews were forcibly exiled from their land. The Jewish claim to the land could not stand if, in fact, there was a break in the attachment of Jews to it. The declaration claims (with some exaggeration) that there never was such a break. Thus, not only historical origins, but continued attachment are central to the Jewish claim to the land of Israel.

The third paragraph makes clear that passive attachment is not sufficient; continuous, active effort to reconstitute Jewish life in the land is necessary to establish the right to establish a state. Hence the (largely false) claim that in “every successive generation” Jews “strove...to re-establish themselves in their ancient homeland.” The phenomenon of revolutionary movements denying their revolutionary character is, of course, not unknown from elsewhere. Still, it is interesting to confront it in the declaration. The political purpose is clear; Zionism represents the natural culmination of continuous Jewish striving. Hence, the “in recent decades...” The sense is given that the “pioneers, ma`apilim and defenders” were not breaking with the Jewish past, but were writing a new chapter of it. This political continuity (of sorts) stands in marked contrast to the document’s view of Jewish culture. In cultural terms the document insists on “shelilat ha- golah”; but in political terms, it is the very (mythical) effort of that golah that legitimizes the Jewish state. And what these pioneers, etc., have accomplished is to bring to life the continuous Jewish dream. They have restored Jewish culture to its proper place (reviving the Hebrew language, lost in the golah), while building the land that, it is implied (largely correctly), was uncultivated before. Unlike diaspora Jews, the Jews of the yishuv controlled their own economy and

culture, and knew how to defend themselves. They represented a different kind of Jew, but, this and the preceding paragraph imply, the kind Jews had been dreaming of for centuries. The state about to be declared is then the natural fulfillment of Jewish political aspirations and efforts, and is justified in those terms. Once again, though, the document slips into the discourse of self-justification through benefiting others. In this case, however, it is a classic colonialist discourse, arguing that Jews bring “progress” to all inhabitants of the land; their presence is thus good for all who have eyes to see. The inherently problematic nature of this claim is exacerbated by the immediately following clause, suggesting that the thriving community aspires toward independent nationhood. Clearly, the goal of the Jewish community in Israel would be to achieve nationhood, and would not be—could not be—to bring progress to all the land’s inhabitants.

At this point the declaration shifts focus. The next two paragraphs read:

4. In the year 5657 (1897) at the summons of the spiritual father of the Jewish state, Theodore Herzl, the first Zionist congress convened and proclaimed the right of the Jewish people to national rebirth in its own country.

5. This right was recognized in the Balfour Declaration of the 2nd November 1917, and reaffirmed in the mandate of the League of Nations which, in particular, gave international sanction to the historic connection between the Jewish people and Eretz Israel and to the right to rebuild its National Home.

Here we have a much more straightforward claim that the right of the Jews to national rebirth was a right that the Jews themselves asserted, and this assertion was recognized by the British government and the League of Nations. While there were, to be sure, other readings of the Balfour Declaration and the League of Nations mandate, the readings presented here seem to me to be plausible, even as they understandably ignore other, less supportive decisions by British. The importance of international recognition of the Jewish claim is clear here. The document seems to say that the connection of Jews to this land is obvious and widely recognized.

There can be no challenge to this right. Yet from the continuation of the declaration it seems that the writers were concerned that one might recognize the Jewish right to the land in the abstract, while suggesting that now would not be an appropriate time to exercise it.

The document thus continues:

6. The catastrophe which recently befell the Jewish people—the massacre of millions of Jews in Europe was another clear demonstration of the urgency of solving the problem of its homelessness by re-establishment in Eretz Israel the Jewish state which would open the gates of the homeland wide to every Jew and confer upon the Jewish people the status of a fully privileged member of the comity of nations.

7. Survivors of the Nazi holocaust in Europe, as well as Jews from other parts of the world, continued to migrate to Eretz Israel undaunted by difficulties, restrictions and dangers, and never ceased to assert their right to a life of dignity, freedom and honest toil in their national homeland.

The declaration makes clear that now is the time for Jews to exercise their internationally recognized and historically justified claim to a national homeland. The Nazi holocaust makes clear that the Jewish question cannot be solved in Europe. Nor can it be solved while Palestine remains under the jurisdiction of others, since these others (the British) create all kinds of difficulties and restrictions, impeding the survivors from a life of dignity, freedom, and honest toil.

While the progression from the previous two paragraphs is clear enough, we must still recognize that a new justification for the state about to be declared has been offered. The state is now presented not merely as the fulfillment of a continuous Jewish aspiration, and not simply as the exercise of a long-standing right, but as the only viable solution to Europe's Jewish question. Homelessness equals defenselessness; such a situation is intolerable. Not only homelessness, but subaltern status within the land creates a cruel impediment to a life of dignity and must be resisted. The context is broader than the British White Paper, as the British Mandate was scheduled to end at midnight on the 14th of May. The declaration obliquely justifies its rejection of an American plan to establish

an international trusteeship in Palestine. The needs and desires of the survivors could never be met by such an arrangement, it is claimed. Part of the justification for the state, then, is that it alone can solve the Jewish question, and it alone could humanely clean up Europe's mess, that is, provide a life of dignity for the survivors of the shoah.

The place of the shoah here is interesting. I confess that I am not among those who are offended by the politicization of the shoah (except in its crassest forms), since I think it is hopelessly naïve to imagine that an event of this magnitude would not elicit political thinking, and that such thinking (as all political thinking) would not serve certain interests. Still, invoking the shoah here suggests that, to the writers, the European Jewish experience is of ultimate political import for all Jews the world over. If the state about to be declared is the culmination of Jewish hope throughout the generations, the shoah is the culmination of

Jewish dread, born of powerlessness. The shoah is paradigmatic of diaspora existence, and is central to the Jewish demand for independence. Needless to say, this claim stands in considerable tension with earlier claims, since now Jewish independence is not justified in terms of Jewish historical rights, but in the political failure of diaspora existence. In this version, a more accepting gentile world would have obviated the need for Jewish independence.

8. In the Second World War, the Jewish community of this country contributed its full share to the struggle of the freedom- and peace-loving nations against the forces of Nazi wickedness and, by the blood of its soldiers and its war effort, gained the right to be reckoned among the peoples who founded the United Nations.

The argument here is insidious, and once again parallels the pathetic arguments of German diasporists who thought that one buys one's way into the moral concern of others, and uglier yet, that one does so by dying in battle. To me it remains deeply depressing that Jews-then and now, Zionists and diasporists alike-are not capable of insisting that they should enjoy the same rights as everyone else (however one would define them) by virtue of their humanity. Jews did not earn the right to be "reckoned among the peoples who founded the United Nations" by virtue of fighting

Nazis; nor does their right to equality in the West depend on a couple of Jews figuring out how to cure polio (or “giving” anyone the Bible). We can only await the day when Jews realize that they do not get their rights from the paritz. While we can debate endlessly (and probably will) whether any groups are “entitled” to self-determination, certainly Jews are no more nor less entitled than anyone else. And, they did not get this entitlement, if such there is, by fighting Nazis.

(Before moving on, let me note that there is no biblical allusion in the “reckoned among the nations” phrase. The Hebrew is not even close to the biblical phrase that the English might lead one to see as allusive.)

9. On the 29th November, 1947, The United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish State in Eretz-Israel; the General Assembly required the inhabitants of Eretz-Israel to take such steps as were necessary on their part for the implementation of that resolution. This recognition by the United Nations of the right of the Jewish people to establish their State is irrevocable.

10. This right is the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their sovereign State.

We come, finally, to the United Nations so-called Partition Plan. The declaration provides the Zionist understanding of that resolution, and, as such, is pretty straight forward. Interesting though is the final sentence, insisting that the recognition is irrevocable. Of course, the only reason for such a sentence is that, practically speaking, it was not true. Indeed, there were efforts in the spring of 1948 to get the UN to revoke that very recognition. But the declaration insists that rights are not something to be bartered and negotiated. The right of the Jewish people to a state of their own, once recognized, cannot be revoked. This is an important claim, in that it shows that the establishment of the state ultimately did not depend on the UN partition plan, since the document explicitly denies to the UN the autonomy to continue to act on Palestine, and implicitly denies to the UN the right to determine the borders of the Jewish state. Having gotten from the UN a plan whose main accomplishment was the end of the

British Mandate, the UN was now removed from the decision making process.

The justification for this in the last paragraph of the mostly historical preamble. The right of the Jews to a state is declared a “natural” right, that is the same for Jews as it is for Germans or Egyptians. I suppose by now it will be clear that to me this is the declaration’s most compelling argument, and one that vitiates much of the peculiar historical and moral thinking that characterizes the rest of this preamble. Here it is stated categorically that Jews do not earn their rights by producing books and “giving” them to others; they do not earn their rights by bringing the blessings of progress to anyone; they do not earn their rights by fighting Nazis. They come by their rights the same way that everyone else does; they are natural, and accrue to the Jews by virtue of their humanity. They share national characteristics with others; they are entitled to the same forms of expression of the national identity as others.

Now, to be sure, there is much that can be challenged in this last statement, from the claim of the national character of the Jews that Zionism (IMO correctly) takes for granted to the notion that self-determination is a “right” that “all other nations” in fact have. Still, the argument of the last paragraph to be considered here is straight-forward and coherent; it demands that Jews be allowed to take their place in the same way that (for better or worse) everyone else does.

The misch-masch of these paragraphs points to the still unresolved tensions within the Zionist movement. With the exception of the last paragraph, the historical sections of the declaration of independence point to how thoroughly nationalist Jews have absorbed the political thinking imposed on them by the hopeless conditions of modern European politics. These sections show that even the most ardent apostles of “normalization” cannot really think of Jews as normal, nor for that matter as truly humanly independent. In this they are no different from the diasporists.