



THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF A ZIONIST

A Personal and Political Journey

ANTONY LERMAN

An honest and moving account—Rabbi David J. Goldberg

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PlutoPress

www.plutobooks.com

First published 2012 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

Distributed in the United States of America exclusively by
Palgrave Macmillan, a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN	978 0 7453 3276 5	Hardback
ISBN	978 1 8496 4752 6	PDF eBook
ISBN	978 1 8496 4754 0	Kindle eBook
ISBN	978 1 8496 4753 3	EPUB eBook

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data applied for

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed
and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are
expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Designed and produced for Pluto Press by Chase Publishing Services Ltd
Typeset from disk by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England
Simultaneously printed digitally by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, UK and
Edwards Bros in the United States of America

*In loving memory of my mother and father
Rachel and Abraham*

Hereby then are all admonished that none hold converse with him by word of mouth, none hold communication with him by writing; that no one do him any service, no one abide under the same roof with him, no one approach within four cubits length of him, and no one read any document dictated by him, or written by his hand.

Rite of expulsion from the Jewish community, in Robert Willis,
Benedict de Spinoza: His Life, Correspondence, and Ethics (1870)

He who lives according to the guidance of reason strives as much as possible to repay the hatred, anger, or contempt of others towards himself with love or generosity ... hatred is increased by reciprocal hatred, and, on the other hand, can be extinguished by love, so that hatred passes into love.

Spinoza, 'Of human bondage or the strength
of the emotions', *Ethics* (1677)

PREFACE

The Israel-Palestine conflict often seems irreconcilable. The clash of political and ideological positions is bitter and polarised. The historical narratives of the two sides profoundly contradict each other. Violent actions to which Israelis and Palestinians have resorted plumb the depths of cruelty and callousness and are likened to the worst evils in history. Two religious traditions seem to be engaged in a Manichean life-and-death struggle. Competing nationalist claims are so fiercely asserted that territorial compromise appears unreachable. When described in these terms, it's no surprise that there is such despair as to whether a peaceful and just resolution can ever be reached; that what drives Palestinians and Israelis, and all who are wrapped up in the conflict, is too large and difficult to comprehend.

I can sympathise with anyone who feels this way. Listening to discussions that all too easily fall back on partisan posturing and trading of insults is enough to drive even the most well-meaning observer to distraction. But it is a false and counterproductive view implying an equivalence of power and status between the two sides that does not exist and encouraging onlookers to adopt an ultimately destructive, 'plague on both their houses' mentality. The problem is how to get people to see the conflict differently; to get beyond the headlines and the oversimplified, fight-to-the-death imagery.

What is so often overlooked, or perhaps even deliberately avoided, is the human dimension. Every Zionist and Palestinian nationalist, soldier and militant, perpetrator and victim – indeed, every individual enmeshed in the conflict – has a personal story. Knowing and understanding more about these individual stories, about how people came to be what they are or were, might help us to find new ways of reconciling differences and thereby rediscover our common humanity. A primary motive for writing *The Making and Unmaking of a Zionist* was to make a contribution to this objective by telling just such a personal story.

The book takes as its premise the belief that small details can illuminate the larger picture. In this case, the small details of a life in which Zionism and Israel have played a large part from an early age. The idea of writing such an account came to me initially in 2005, but it was only in 2009 that I finally felt free from external or self-imposed constraints and could fulfil a desire to retrace my personal and political journey over the last 50 years. In addition

to demystifying some of the sources of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the story of my professional life may throw light on the internal history of a minority community in the UK as it sought to come to terms with a burgeoning of dissenting Jewish views on Zionism and Israel.

I became a Zionist in my early teens. I wanted to live on a kibbutz and build a socialist society in the new Jewish State of Israel. In 1970, when I was 24 years old, I realised my dream and went to live there. After two years I returned to England, studied for a university degree and worked briefly as a history lecturer. In 1979 I began working as a researcher, writer and editor for an institute dealing with contemporary issues affecting Jews worldwide. Over the next 30 years, both as an observer and a participant, I became ever more deeply engaged in communal and global Jewish politics, of which my involvement with Zionism and Israel was an integral part. I founded a Jewish policy think tank and subsequently established a multi-million pound grant-making foundation supporting Jewish life in Europe. In 2006 I returned to head the think tank and found myself at the centre of polemical debates over the danger of antisemitism and the policies of the State of Israel. After a three-year struggle with individuals and organisations within the Jewish and pro-Israel establishment, I resigned from the directorship in 2009.

During these years my understanding of the meaning of my engagement with Israel and the political ideology that inspired it has changed dramatically. But that change came about very gradually and unsystematically.

Without a day-by-day record, writing about one's past involves a great deal of both retrospection and re-imagination. This makes it easy to filter events and ascribe to some of them a significance they did not have at the time. And when you are describing how you arrived at views that you later repudiated, the temptation is very strong to use hindsight to show that even then you had doubts. Nevertheless, I have tried to tell my story with as little use of hindsight as possible and have added context and explanation only where it is necessary for understanding. My intention is to take the reader with me on my journey, exposing the views I held and the experiences I had without offering excuses or qualifications. I realise this is a risky strategy and that my apparent naivety may provoke a negative response. But my hope is that the story I tell will be sufficiently interesting and compelling to make the reader want to accompany me.

I write with insider knowledge of the workings of organised Jewish communal life, the functioning of national and international Jewish political organisations and the development of the Zionist movement. While in itself this does not guarantee insight, I believe it gives me a unique perspective from which to recall my personal, political and intellectual journey. It is the human dimension, the individual story, but not divorced from social and

political reality. As such I hope it provides a better understanding of how an individual became engaged with the dynamics of an idea and a reality, Zionism and Israel, and helps get beyond the stereotypes and the slogans associated with a conflict that continues to have such a major impact on the contemporary world.

And while you may wonder how the small details of a personal story can have relevance for a conflict of such significance, it is important to remember that diaspora Jewish attitudes are a major factor policy-makers take into account when it comes to determining policy on the Israel-Palestine conflict in Washington, London, Jerusalem and elsewhere.

What I have not done is write an autobiography. I certainly include autobiographical material and could not have described my experience of Zionism and Israel without drawing on personal facts and recollections. But I skim very lightly over those periods of my life when these matters were not provoking new thoughts. Similarly I mention other people only when their personalities, views, actions or statements seem central to my story. And while I have tried throughout to be honest about my own weaknesses and failings, I have stopped short of full disclosure since I did not want to lose sight of the central subject matter of Zionism and Israel. I hope I have got the balance right.

Antony Lerman
June 2012

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

(Founding date of organisations, where known, in parentheses)

ADL	Anti-Defamation League (1913), American Jewish defence organisation
AJC	American Jewish Committee (1906), advocacy organisation
BEF	British Expeditionary Force in the Second World War
BoD	Board of Deputies of British Jews (1760), official representative body of British Jews
CAABU	Council for the Advancement of Arab British Understanding (1967), London-based lobby group
CPPME	Canadian Professors for Peace in the Middle East
CRIF	Conseil Représentatif des Institutions juives de France (Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France)
CSEPS	Centre for the Study of European Politics and Society, Ben Gurion University, Israel
CST	Community Security Trust (1994), private British Jewish defence organisation
ECJC	European Council of Jewish Communities, originally the European Council of Jewish Community Services (1940s)
EJC	European Jewish Congress (1986), European affiliate of the WJC
IDF	Israel Defence Forces
IDT	Israel-Diaspora Trust (1982), private discussion forum
IJA	Institute of Jewish Affairs (1942), research arm of the WJC, predecessor of JPR
IJV	Independent Jewish Voices (2007), a network of individuals representing an alternative voice for Jews in Britain
JAFI	Jewish Agency for Israel (originally Jewish Agency for Palestine, 1929)
JFJHR	Jewish Forum for Justice and Human Rights (2003)
JLC	Jewish Leadership Council
JNF	Jewish National Fund (1901), founded to buy land in Palestine for Jewish settlement
JPPPI	Jewish People Policy Planning Institute (2002), think tank set up by JAFI

JPR	Institute for Jewish Policy Research (1996), independent think tank, successor organisation to the IJA
JSG	Jewish Socialists' Group (1970s), a Jewish political organisation in Britain
Machon	Institute for Youth Leaders from Abroad (Jerusalem)
MCB	Muslim Council of Britain
SICSA	Sassoon International Centre for the Study of Antisemitism, Hebrew University Jerusalem
Sikkuy	Association for Civic Equality in Israel
UJIA	United Jewish Israel Appeal
WJC	World Jewish Congress (1936), international political body representing Jewish interests worldwide
WZO	World Zionist Organisation (1896), umbrella organisation for the Zionist movement
ZF	Zionist Federation of Great Britain (1899), umbrella body for the Zionist movement in Britain

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	viii
<i>Abbreviations and Acronyms</i>	xi
1 From Bourgeois to Builder	1
2 Sunrise Over the Carmel	11
3 Socialist Zionist	25
4 'It Is No Dream'	36
5 Searching for Myself	53
6 Rocking the Boat	75
7 Political Animal	93
8 Darkening Skies in Israel and Europe	102
9 Shedding Illusions	115
10 Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire	136
11 Character Assassination and Self-Censorship	147
12 'Gunning for Lerman'	158
13 Pressing On	169
14 The Sense of an Ending	185
15 Afterword	192
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	207
<i>Sources for Chapter Heading Quotations</i>	208
<i>Note on Sources</i>	209
<i>Glossary</i>	212
<i>Index</i>	214

FROM BOURGEOIS TO BUILDER

*May they grow strong, the hands of our gifted brothers,
Who grace the dust of our land;
Don't let your spirits fall, but be joyful, with song.
Come, with one voice, shoulder to shoulder, to the aid of the people.*

Chaim Nachman Bialik, 'Strengthen the hands', 1894,
anthem of the Zionist youth movement

My heart was pounding in my eight-year-old chest. I had just splashed through the shallow waters of a Surrey stream and thrown myself flat on the sloping bank. I pressed my face against the mud as I peered nervously over the edge. My sandaled feet were immersed in water, but I was so excited, I didn't give it a thought. I had a stick in my hand and was waiting for the command to clamber over the top and attack the enemy in the field beyond the fence. Two of the camp's youth leaders were nearby. I could see that they were looking at me and smiling incredulously. In a bemused tone one of them said something to the other about my 'enthusiasm'. Seconds later, as the word *Kadima!* ('Forward!') disturbed the still air of the English countryside and the sound rippled down the line of children in our tribe spread out along the bank, I was racing for the fence as the mock battle was about to begin.

Who were we fighting? This game was being played at a ten-day summer camp of the British Zionist youth movement, Habonim ('The Builders'), held in 1954 on a farm in Capel, a village in the Weald, just north of the Surrey-Sussex border. We were almost certainly re-enacting a battle between the Haganah, the underground Jewish military forces in Palestine, and the Arab armies during the 1948 war of Israel's independence. Through Israeli songs, games played using Hebrew words, stories told round the campfire and the teaching of scouting and camping lore, together with dozens of other children I learnt about Israel and Zionism, act and idea, for the first time.

I was there with my older brother Steve and neither of us had been away from home for such a long period. We were not members of the movement and it showed. Photos captured us standing on parade outside our tents in white school shirts and grey flannel shorts. Most other children were in khaki

2 THE MAKING AND UNMAKING OF A ZIONIST

shorts or cotton skirts, summer shirts, sleeveless tops or the pale blue shirts of the movement uniform. Our parents came to visit us on Open Day. I cried and wanted to go home, but they persuaded me to stay.

I didn't go to another such camp for five years. Nor did I start going regularly to the local movement group's weekly activity, which was held in a synagogue hall near our Golders Green home. Nevertheless, a seed had been planted. The decision determined the future course of my life.

* * *

Mum and Dad were orthodox, Ashkenazi Jews, who loved Jewish tradition. If they were not as strictly observant as they could have been, it was not out of any disrespect for the laws and teachings of the religion, but more a reflection of their wish to accommodate the modern world and of their non-doctrinal sense of Judaism's meaning. My Ukrainian-born paternal grandfather, Simcha, who arrived in England in 1901, was a member of the very traditional orthodox Federation of Synagogues, founded in the late nineteenth century to cater for Eastern European immigrants. He was a cabinet-maker with no pretensions to learning and no aptitude for making money. My maternal grandfather, Myer Miller, whose parents came to England from Poland in the late 1870s, also had little education, but, rather more successful in trade, by the 1920s he had his own small and thriving tailoring firm in Shoreditch, in London's East End.

Like all children born into observant Jewish families, my parents were first given Hebrew names, Abraham and Rachel. But Dad, one of seven children, was known as Dick since his early twenties, and Mum, who had a twin sister and a younger brother, was known as Ray. Dad's family was very poor. They lived in rented rooms in Mile End. He left school at 13. For Mum, life was considerably more comfortable. Myer and his wife Rose moved out of the East End and bought a semi-detached house on the Hendon Way, near suburban Golders Green. Ray had a relatively relaxed and modern upbringing, but maintaining Jewish tradition, getting married and bringing up a family always came first. Her formal education ended when she was 15.

Dick and Ray met before the Second World War, but Dad was soon drafted into the Royal Berkshire Regiment and packed off to the continent with the British Expeditionary Force. As 'Abraham' he might have been vulnerable had he fallen into the clutches of the Germans, so he quickly acquired the name Dick. He was an infantryman trying to keep the Germans at bay as the BEF retreated to Dunkirk. Sheltering in a ditch, he was hit by shrapnel from a German mortar exploding above him and came to in a German field hospital. He spent more than three and a half years in German prisoner-of-

war camps before returning to England in a prisoner exchange towards the end of 1943.

Shrapnel permanently weakened Dad's right hand and the camp conditions left him vulnerable to bronchitis for the rest of his life. He trained as a tailor and cutter and worked for my grandfather. He and Ray married in March 1944 and Steve was born in the September. I was born in March 1946. By then we were living in our own, three-bedroom semi-detached house round the corner from my grandparents, on the Pennine estate in north-west London where all the roads were named after English hill ranges. My father worked hard. It was a good time to be in bespoke tailoring. Despite austerity, the normality and comfort he craved after his years of incarceration seemed to come remarkably quickly. Soon we were holidaying in Brighton and Bognor and then further afield in France and Belgium, where Dad was reunited with the family that visited and cared for him in his Belgian hospital before being forced east to Stalag 8b.

Mum kept a strictly kosher home. Dad joined the United Synagogue congregation in Dunstan Road where my grandfather Myer was a member. We went regularly to synagogue on *Shabbat* and observed all the festivals. I was barely four, very shy and saddled with a slight stammer when I joined my brother at the synagogue *cheder* (religion school) to learn the basics of Judaism four times a week. Although the lessons took place in a leafy suburb of London, there was still something of the Eastern European *shtetl* about the atmosphere. That world had been destroyed – not that we knew then much about what had yet to become known as the Holocaust – but you could see its genetic imprint in the faces of some of the teachers, the Hebrew primers and the occasionally severe discipline. Few concessions were made to modern teaching methods. We learnt how to read classical Hebrew to enable us to master the prayers and participate fully in the religious services. Understanding what the words meant came only later, if at all, as I was not a good student. My mind wandered. It all seemed dreary and stultifying. I longed to be playing with the children running free in the adjacent park.

Modest and gentle, my parents took their religion seriously, but they also had a fairly liberal and relaxed attitude to orthodoxy. (Mainstream orthodox practice in Britain was tolerant and accommodating, and compatible with the process of assimilation our family was undergoing.) They followed the laws and commandments as far as they could, but never preached to others. They were both active on synagogue committees. But on most Saturdays Dad had to be in his shop in Shoreditch.

Israel was a presence, but not a dominant one. Together with tens of thousands of other British Jews we kept a blue Jewish National Fund collecting tin on the mantelpiece and dropped in small change for planting forests

in Israel. But I doubt that my parents had any awareness of the political ideology of Zionism. Israel gave them a sense of pride and security in a world still recovering from mass death and economic deprivation. But their Jewish lives were lived firmly within the framework of the synagogue, their nearby extended families and their many local Jewish friends. At weddings and bar mitzvahs we toasted the President of the State of Israel and then sang the *Hatikva*, which we knew then as the Jewish national anthem, but which was also the Israeli national anthem.

* * *

In the early 1930s, when she was a young teenager, Mum was briefly a member of Habonim, then still in its infancy (it was founded in Britain in 1929). So when it came to filling our young lives with enjoyable activities, I suspect the pleasurable memory of that experience is what induced her to send me and Steve to the ten-day Habonim summer camp in Surrey, in 1954.

Attending the camp planted in me an awareness of Israel, but it had no particular effect on my life over the following five years. I coped with being a borderline 11+ failure, with a move to what was seen at the time as a rather inferior grammar school and with my bar mitzvah, which was not without trauma. I failed the associated exam to test my knowledge of Judaism and barely scraped through at the second attempt. But around my 13th birthday, I joined the local Habonim group, following in the footsteps of my brother.

I have often wondered why my parents encouraged this. As far as I know, Israel had not become any more important for them in 1959 than it had been in 1954. And yet there is one obvious explanation. As with most Jewish boys of my age and religious upbringing, religious education came to an end with the bar mitzvah. Further Jewish knowledge could be acquired through regular participation in services and study sessions with the rabbi. But I rejected this path. Much as I disliked *cheder*, I had friends I enjoyed mixing with but now would not see as often. I'm sure that my parents wanted me to continue spending as much time as possible with other Jewish children, both doing things I would enjoy and continuing my Jewish education. Although orthodox, they did not indulge in public displays of religiosity, apart from the minimum of what was expected of them as synagogue members, so there was little chance of them sending me to a religious youth movement like B'nai Akiva. Two or three hours on a Sunday afternoon at the local Habonim group was a logical choice.

I also attended the synagogue youth club, but it was devoid of any Jewish educational or cultural content. We played table tennis, football and other sports at Habonim but in other respects it was, self-consciously, very different.

The afternoon's activities were more rigidly organised. We wore uniforms. Practically everything that we did involved the use of modern Hebrew words, so we quickly came to see the language as a living thing, for everyday use. It contrasted starkly with *cheder* Hebrew, the language of an oppressive religiosity I was beginning to abandon. The youth leaders, *madrichim* (guides) in Hebrew, were often just a few years older than us and far more than just organisers dedicated to giving us fun things to do. The most successful *madrich* had charisma, 'personality'. We were encouraged to look up to them and follow their example.

Habonim deprecated the mindlessness of the youth club and had specific educational goals. It took the outdoor, clean-living, muscular philosophy of scouting and married it to identification with Israel. It was not doctrinally anti-religious, but what could be further from the musty *cheder* than hiking in the countryside and lustily singing modern Hebrew songs? This linked us to an Israel typified by images of young, bronzed Jews, working on their ancestral land, but committed to rebuild Israel as a modern state, the home of the 'new Jew'.

The smattering of military culture present at times was a far cry from the regimentation and cadet uniforms of the Jewish Lads' Brigade. The Jewish soldier in Israel epitomised the 'new Jew', an image very far removed from anything we had encountered in the Jewish diaspora. He carried the torch of Jews who took up arms against the Nazis. And the ideal Jewish soldier was the Palmachnik, a member of the Palmach, the elite fighting force of the Haganah. In Habonim the Palmach symbolised the left-wing, democratic nature of Israel's citizen army, because Palmachniks lived and trained on kibbutzim. The Palmach had a major influence on Israeli politics and culture, and shaped the way Israelis saw themselves in the early years of the state.

The rousing anthem of the Palmach ('Misaviv yehom hasa'ar', 'All around us the storm rages') was among the many Israeli songs we were taught as part of a programme that immersed us in aspects of Israeli culture. Many were about Israeli or Jewish heroism, but also the biblical connection between Jews and the Land of Israel, nature and pioneering. Especially stirring was the anthem of the youth movement, the poem 'Techezakna' ('Strengthen the hands') written in 1894 by Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873–1934), the most influential of the modern Hebrew poets and considered the poet laureate of Jewish nationalism.

The movement wasn't as dour and mirthless as it may sound. In contrast to the ideological seriousness there was the tradition of the 'zig', the humorous, pun-laden sketch, part cabaret, part precursor to *Beyond the Fringe*, which lampooned aspects of the movement itself, or topical events. It was a fixture of any organised movement party, celebration or final night of camp. The youth

leaders would endeavour to involve as many people as possible in writing and putting on zigs, but talent always rose to the top and a few people dominated this comedy scene, although I was not one of them. Ability to perform and raise a laugh was highly prized.

The youth movement experience was most fully realised at weekend and summer camps. The one I attended in August 1959 was very similar to the camp I went to in 1954, only rather more ambitious. We hiked across country in small groups for two days, carrying bivvy tents. On the second night we had to mount a mock attack. The 'bravery' and enthusiasm of the eight-year-old had been replaced by the nervousness of a 13-year-old and I chose to remain behind to look after the camp rather than trek off into the frightening night.

The Habonim activities were fun, new and different and offered an appealing mixture of group camaraderie, independence and sharing. This contrasted with the individual effort and endeavour demanded by a much harsher regime at Orange Hill County Grammar School for Boys, where I was struggling to keep up. At Habonim I had the opportunity to meet and mix with girls and, especially at camps, to pair off in relatively supervised circumstances. The process of absorbing Israeli culture, becoming aware of something called Zionism and being introduced to socialist political ideology was all very gradual. Even so, as a fairly shy child and something of a homeboy, I drifted away for a while. The weekly meeting of my group changed to a Saturday evening and I occasionally chose to stay at home. I had other interests: table tennis, making models, slot-car racing, constructing transistor radios. But I also had a rebellious streak and did all I could to avoid attending synagogue. Habonim gave me a safe outlet for that rebelliousness and for the fulfilment of the new range of emotional needs thrown up by puberty. So I began attending regularly again, developed close friendships and my first serious relationship with a girl. By the time I was 16, Habonim was the centre of my social life.

I only began to develop signs of intellectual curiosity when I was 15. Good teachers awakened my interest in history and English. I started to listen to classical music, with the help of my English master who lent me records of Beethoven's 5th and 3rd symphonies. Older friends introduced me to modern poetry, to the novels of Jack Kerouac and the jazz of Thelonius Monk. I started writing poems, began making regular weekly trips to Charing Cross Road to buy novels and political texts, and I developed left-wing opinions.

The movement promoted agricultural work as the most important task for Jews wanting to build the new state and we were introduced to it at the summer camp for 16-year-olds. This was the age when you might be asked, as I was, to become a *madrich*. And at 17 you could attend the one-year youth training course (*Hachsharat Noar*) covering basic agriculture, modern