



PROJECT MUSE®

1967: An Elegy of Conquest

Seth Anziska

Jewish Quarterly Review, Volume 108, Number 4, Fall 2018, pp. 536-544 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.2018.0036>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/708227>

1967: An Elegy of Conquest

SETH ANZISKA

University College London

SHORTLY AFTER ISRAEL'S LIGHTNING VICTORY in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the leading Jewish philosopher and Israeli public intellectual Yeshayahu Leibowitz published his reflections on the territorial conquests that had brought the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights under the state's control.

Our real problem is not the territory but rather the population of about a million and a half Arabs who live in it and over whom we must rule. Inclusion of these Arabs (in addition to the half a million who are citizens of the state) in the area under our rule will effect the liquidation of the state of Israel as the state of the Jewish people and bring about a catastrophe for the Jewish people as a whole; it will undermine the social structure that we have created in the state and cause the corruption of individuals, both Jew and Arab . . . In a short time the spiritual and emotional links between it and world Jewry would be severed, as well as the cultural and sentimental ties to the historical tradition of the Jewish people and to Judaism. The only concern of the monstrosity called "the undivided land of Israel" would be the maintenance of its system of rule and administration.¹

Leibowitz was attacked at the time for his scathing indictment, which was written in Hebrew and directed at an Israeli public that the philosopher felt had not reckoned with the consequences of the war. His sentiments did not fit well with the explosion of nationalist fervor, from the redemptive messianism of the religious right to more earthly outpourings of support for expanded state lines among secular kibbutz members and Labor party stalwarts of the left. Whether in the name of security or

1. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 225.

national rights, God or Bible, a large swath of Israeli society and Jewish supporters abroad embraced Israel's expansion. Prophets of doom and their dissenting voices were unwelcome guests at this celebratory gathering.²

More than fifty years have passed, and Leibowitz sounds less like a gadfly or crank and more a diagnostician of the present reality. Revisiting his writings on the anniversary of 1967 raises the question of that fateful year's impact on Israel, on Palestinians and the wider Arab world, and finally on modern Jewish politics. Unlike the 1948 war, which enabled Israel to achieve internationally recognized borders along the armistice lines, the 1967 victory set in motion the slow erosion of state boundaries.³ In the wake of the war, a fierce debate broke out in the Israeli cabinet about the future of the newly occupied territories and how to manage the Palestinian population under direct state control. As meticulous historical research reveals, the government of Levi Eshkol made a "decision not to decide" on the fate of the territories, preferring indefinite control over the land without conferring rights on the inhabitants who lived there.⁴

This "temporary" state of indecision became a model for permanence, leading to one of the longest military occupations of the twentieth century.⁵ An entirely new legal and bureaucratic apparatus was set in place

2. On the war and its internal and regional impact, see Tom Segev, *1967: Israel, the War, and the Year That Transformed the Middle East* (New York, 2007); and Guy Laron, *The Six-Day War and the Breaking of the Middle East* (New Haven, Conn., 2017). On voices of dissent, see *Siach lochpamim*, published in English by Avraham Shapira as *The Seventh Day: Soldiers' Talk about the Six-Day War* (New York, 1970). The censored sections and original audio recordings are the subject of the documentary *Censored Voices*, directed by Mor Loushy (Israel, 2015). See Gili Izikovich, "The Seventh Day: Censored Voices from the 1967 War," *Haaretz*, June 7, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.659923>.

3. The distinction between 1948 and 1967 is a matter of critical debate. See Yehouda Shenhav, *Beyond the Two-State Solution: A Jewish Political Essay* (London, 2012). On the vexed role of the West Bank in illuminating the differences in state policy before 1967 and after, see Avshalom Rubin, *The Limits of the Land: How the Struggle for the West Bank Shaped the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Bloomington, Ind., 2017).

4. Avi Raz, *The Bride and the Dowry: Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinians in the Aftermath of the June 1967 War* (New Haven, Conn., 2012), 44. See also Adam Shatz, "Indecision as Strategy," *London Review of Books* 34:19 (2012): 26–31.

5. On the history and practices of the occupation, see Gershon Shafir, *A Half Century of Occupation: Israel, Palestine, and the World's Most Intractable Conflict* (Oakland, Calif., 2017); Eyal Weizmann, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London, 2012); Neve Gordon, *Israel's Occupation* (Berkeley, Calif., 2008); and Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir, *The One State Condition: Occupation and Democracy in Israel/Palestine* (Stanford, Calif., 2013).

to sustain this occupation, deferring any reckoning with the political rights of the captive population.⁶ Alongside the deprivation of rights came the extension of Jewish sovereignty through the building of settlements in the occupied territories, a project that began under the Labor government of Eshkol and expanded dramatically under the Likud-led coalitions of Menachem Begin and his chief builder, Ariel Sharon.⁷ The accompanying transformation of Israeli society, from the birth of Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful) to the influx of American Jewish settlers, led to the normalization of settlement life and the accompanying evisceration of the contiguous Palestinian territory itself.⁸

Beyond the daily indignities of life under such occupation, Palestinians have had to confront the deeper existential consequences of prolonged statelessness. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which was founded in 1964, was given new life in the aftermath of the war, as nationalist Palestinian leaders seized the struggle away from regional power brokers.⁹ A gradual abandonment of armed struggle led to the eventual

6. See Ian S. Lustick, "Israel and the West Bank after Elon Moreh: The Mechanics of De Facto Annexation," *Middle East Journal* 35.4 (1981): 557–77; David Kretzmer, *The Occupation of Justice: The Supreme Court of Israel and the Occupied Territories* (Albany, N.Y., 2002); and Lisa Hajjar, *Courting Conflict: The Israeli Military Court System in the West Bank and Gaza* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005). A powerful reconstruction of the development of the legal regime in the territories is the documentary *Shilton ha-hok* (The law in these parts), directed by Ra'anan Alexandrowicz (Israel, 2011).

7. On the history of the settlements, see Gershom Gorenberg, *The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of the Settlements, 1967–1977* (New York, 2006); and Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar, *Lords of the Land: The War over Israel's Settlements in the Occupied Territories, 1967–2007* (New York, 2007).

8. On Gush Emunim, see Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism* (Chicago, 1996); and Michael Feige, *Settling in the Hearts: Jewish Fundamentalism in the Occupied Territories* (Detroit, 2009). On American Jewish settlers, see Sarah Yael Hirschhorn, *City on a Hilltop: American Jews and the Israeli Settler Movement* (Cambridge, Mass., 2017). On settlement life, see M. Allegra, A. Handel, and E. Maggor, *Normalizing Occupation: The Politics of Everyday Life in the West Bank Settlements* (Bloomington, Ind., 2017). For the corrosive influence of the occupation on Israel and the Palestinians, see David Grossman, *The Yellow Wind* (New York, 2002); Raja Shehadeh, *Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape* (New York, 2008); *Where the Line Is Drawn: A Tale of Crossings, Friendships, and Fifty Years of Occupation in Israel-Palestine* (New York, 2017); Ben Ehrenreich, *The Way to the Spring: Life and Death in Palestine* (New York, 2016); and M. Chabon and A. Waldman, eds., *Kingdom of Olives and Ash: Writers Confront the Occupation* (New York, 2017).

9. See Ahmad Samih Khalidi, "Ripples of the 1967 War," *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Spring 2017, <https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/ripples-of-the-1967-war>; Wendy Pearlman, "The Palestinian National Movement," in *The 1967 Arab-*

acceptance of partition and political engagement with Israel by the 1980s. The Oslo Accords of 1993 brought Palestinian nationalist exiles back to govern 22 percent of historic Palestine, where they served as an interim Palestinian Authority on the very land that the PLO envisioned as the future Palestinian state. Simultaneously, alongside these crucial changes in Palestinian national strategy, the possibility of partition was being rendered ever more unlikely by Israel's de facto annexation of the territories through robust settlement expansion. Given this context, what possible future exists for Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, for Palestinian citizens of Israel, and for stateless refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and farther afield?

In the Arab world, the 1967 war launched an intellectual search for answers about the limits of pan-Arabism, the fate of nationalism, and the cultural consequences of defeat. It haunted Arab thinkers from North Africa to the Levant and underscored the profound changes afoot, from the growing influence of Islamism to the persistence of sclerotic statist models of governance.¹⁰ The Palestinian question has therefore been an integral part of—and even a catalyst for—the broader reordering of Arab societies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Introspection by the defeated is perhaps a natural outcome of war. What of the victors? Leibowitz recognized the redemptive impulses of Jews in Israel and the diaspora toward the 1967 war, including the invocation of messianism and the sanctification of military power, and he condemned these impulses outright. “This is latter day Sabbateanism,” Leibowitz remarked in a 1974 interview, “a modern incarnation of false prophecy, a prostitution of the Jewish religion in the interest of chauvinism and lust for power.”¹¹ Already in 1968, the philosopher had dismissed religious arguments for the annexation of territories, which he regarded as “only an expression, subconsciously or perhaps even overtly hypocritical, of the transformation of Jewish religion into a camouflage for Israeli nationalism.”¹² That such a transformation was taking place among the

Israeli War: Origins and Consequences, ed. A. Shlaim and W. R. Louis (Cambridge, 2012), 126–48; and Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for a State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949–1993* (Oxford, 2000).

10. See Rashid Khalidi, “The 1967 War and the Demise of Arab Nationalism: Chronicle of a Death Foretold,” and Fawaz A. Gerges, “The Transformation of Arab Politics: Disentangling Myth from Reality,” in Shlaim and Louis, *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War*, 264–314. For an extensive treatment of Arab intellectual self-critique after 1967, see Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York, 2009).

11. Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, 203.

12. Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, 226.

national religious community would be an obvious source of consternation for Leibowitz, a deeply committed Orthodox Jew who had been attuned to the tension between religion and politics since before the creation of the state.¹³ His critique of Jewish nationalism stemmed from a fear that the Jewish religion had imbued secular Zionism with a holiness that enabled state violence of the most pernicious kind.¹⁴

It was not just the religious, however, who seized on 1967 as a moment of rupture and opportunity. The secular Israeli national poet Nathan Alterman became a founding member of the “Movement for Greater Israel,” which sought to impose Israeli sovereignty on all the territories captured in the war and opposed any peace initiative involving withdrawal.¹⁵ While publicly calling for “freedom and equality” and nondiscrimination for all residents of the country, this movement denied Palestinian Arabs the right to self-determination. As Alterman wrote in 1969, “There is a factual and ideological emptiness in that artificial and spurious population going by the misnomer of ‘the Palestinian Arab nation.’”¹⁶ The lightning victory had hardened the poet’s humanism with a more inflexibly tribalist outlook, as he asserted that the right to the land belonged solely to the Jewish people.¹⁷

In this process of transformation within Israel, an antidemocratic impulse took root. As the Israeli literary scholar Hannan Hever has argued, “Alterman the Zionist found himself in a revolutionary and critical position,” rejecting the state’s legal limits on governing the territories in favor of “loftier laws.”¹⁸ In an essay published just after the end of the war, the poet decried the gap that had opened “between the Jewish people, the Land of Israel, and the state of Israel” in light of the government’s hesitation to impose Israeli sovereignty and settle the land.¹⁹ Zionism’s political achievements were conflated with territorial conquest, and withdrawal from the captured areas, as Alterman’s biographer Dan Laor

13. On Leibowitz’s views of religion, state, and society, see Eliezer Goldman’s introduction to Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*.

14. This critique was extant well before 1967. See “After Kibiyeh,” in Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*. 185–90.

15. On Alterman’s transformation, see Dan Laor, “The Last Chapter: Nathan Alterman and the Six-Day War” *Israel Studies* 4.2 (1999): 178–94.

16. Cited in Laor, “The Last Chapter,” 185.

17. Laor, “The Last Chapter,” 185.

18. Hannan Hever, “Nathan Alterman (1910–1970): Poetry National and Political,” in J. Picard, J. M. Revel, M. P. Steinberg, and I. Zertal, eds., *Makers of Jewish Modernity: Thinkers, Artists, Leaders, and the World They Made* (Princeton, N.J., 2016), 505.

19. *Ibid.*

explains, “would necessarily result in the delegitimization of Zionism, the collapse of the Return to Zion dream, and the termination of the State of Israel.”²⁰ Secular poets of the left had made common cause with the religious right: both groups had imbued the state with metaphysical and sacred meaning, collapsing Jewish religion, history, and peoplehood into a toxic nationalist mix that has persisted ever since.²¹

The year 1967 illuminated a shift in focus from powerlessness to unbridled power in the study of modern Jewish politics, the unexamined parallel to changes in Arab political culture. While earlier phases of Zionist settlement in Palestine were marked by the use of force, the attainment of political sovereignty and the establishment of a state in 1948 signaled a pivotal departure.²² This revolution was sealed by the 1967 war, which served to liberate Israeli society from a great deal of national vulnerability while also unleashing rival political impulses.²³ Internal struggles for inclusion that marked Jewish and Arab communities in the state’s early years gave way to perpetual Jewish control over external Arab territories.²⁴ The unsurprising results, as any Breaking the Silence tour of Hebron or B’Tselem report on human rights abuses in the occupied territories will show, have inevitably led to attacks on the messenger rather than a reckoning with the abuse of power itself.²⁵

20. Laor, “The Last Chapter,” 189.

21. The question of a secular impulse at the heart of political Zionism is examined by Yotam Hotam, *Modern Gnosis and Zionism: The Crisis of Culture, Life Philosophy and Jewish National Thought* (London, 2013); and Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York, 2013).

22. On the Zionist attitude to power in the pre-state period, see Anita Shapira, *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881–1948* (Stanford, Calif., 1999). For a broader study of Jewish attitudes to war, see Derek J. Penslar, *Jews and the Military: A History* (Princeton, N.J., 2013).

23. The journalist Yossi Klein Halevi traces the impact of the war on key segments of Israeli society in *Like Dreamers: The Story of the Israeli Paratroopers Who Reunited Jerusalem and Divided a Nation* (New York, 2013).

24. For the early internal struggles among Israeli Jews, see Orit Rozin, *A Home for All Jews: Citizenship, Rights, and National Identity in the New Israeli State* (Waltham, Mass., 2016); Yfaat Weiss, *A Confucated Memory: Wadi Salib and Haifa’s Lost Heritage* (New York, 2011); and Yaron Tsur, “Carnival Fears: Moroccan Immigrants and the Ethnic Problem in the Young State of Israel,” *Journal of Israeli History* 18.1 (1997): 73–104. On the pre-1967 treatment of Arabs by the Israeli state, see Shira Robinson, *Citizen Strangers: Palestinians and the Birth of Israel’s Liberal Settler State* (Stanford, Calif., 2013); and Hillel Cohen, *Good Arabs: The Israeli Security Agencies and the Israeli Arabs, 1948–1967* (Berkeley, Calif., 2010).

25. See, for example, the extensive debate over the recent trial of Elor Azaria, an Israeli medic who shot and killed an immobilized Palestinian attacker, Abdel Fattah al-Sharif, in Hebron’s Tel Rumeida neighborhood. Noam Sheizaf, “A

Jewish power has often been neglected by scholars in favor of a focus on its absence, but the sweeping military victory of the war inaugurated a reordering of Jewish scholarly and public attitudes toward the state.²⁶ A new era in modern Jewish history was unfolding, characterized by might and intoxicating nationalism. The attendant limits were laid bare by the jarring setback of 1973 and the overreach of the 1982 Lebanon war, which exposed the folly of a “war of choice” aimed in large part at destroying Palestinian nationalism. There were other shifts underway, most notably changing consciousness about the Holocaust and its legacy, which registered differently inside Israel and farther afield.²⁷ Taken together, these developments require a rewriting (or writing) of post-1967 Jewish history in a less triumphalist key.²⁸

Israel’s official ceremony marking the fiftieth anniversary of 1967 heeded no such lessons in humility. The ten-million-shekel (\$2.74 million) state ceremony took place in the Gush Etzion settlement, beginning in Kfar Etzion, a kibbutz destroyed in the 1948 war and reestablished after 1967. When these plans were announced, Culture Minister Miri Regev dismissed critics of the location who raised concerns that they ignored the occupied status of the West Bank and the ongoing denial of rights to local inhabitants, arguing that “regardless of the conflict over these parts of the country, every Israeli should know and cherish these places as the

Prison Sentence That Tells the True Story of the Occupation,” *+972 Magazine*, February 21, 2017, <https://972mag.com/a-prison-sentence-that-tells-the-true-story-of-the-occupation/125378>.

26. A crucial rethinking of this topic is David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (New York, 1986). For a very different view, which sees Zionism as the ultimate solution to Jewish powerlessness, see Ruth Wisse, *Jews and Power* (New York, 2007).

27. See Saul Friedländer, *Where Memory Leads: My Life* (New York, 2016); Enzo Traverso, *The End of Jewish Modernity* (London, 2016); Idith Zertal, *Israel’s Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood* (Cambridge, 2005); Hasia Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962* (New York, 2009); Hanna Yablonka, “The Development of Holocaust Consciousness in Israel: The Nuremberg, Kapos, Kastner and Eichmann Trials,” *Israel Studies* 8.3 (2003): 1–24; and Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York, 2000).

28. For an illuminating literary rethinking of Israeli and Jewish history in light of this periodization, see Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, “From Auschwitz to the Temple Mount: Binding and Unbinding the Israeli Narrative,” in *After Testimony: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Holocaust Narrative for the Future*, ed. J. Lothe, S. R. Suleiman, and J. Phelan (Columbus, Ohio, 2012): 291–313.

cradle of the Jewish people and its culture."²⁹ There were also ceremonies recognizing fifty years of a "unified Jerusalem," premised on the unrecognized and unofficial annexation of the eastern half of the city by the Eshkol government.³⁰

Anniversaries help demarcate time, but historical processes continue apace. Not far from the celebrations in Kfar Etzion lies the village of Nahleh. Its residents surely heard the fireworks at the state celebration nearby. As the large settlement of Efrat expands, Palestinian landowners in Nahleh fear the seizure of their property and the cutting off of Bethlehem from Palestinian towns to the south.³¹ The same impulses that followed the 1967 war animate this process of expropriation, whereby the High Court of Justice allows the Israeli state to declare ownership over the land. For all the contested meanings that this fifty-year anniversary evokes for Israel and for diaspora Jews, its resonance is more acutely felt across the West Bank hinterlands, from Jenin and Nablus to Beit Jala and Tulkarem; among the long lines of Palestinian noncitizens waiting under a corrugated metal roof to pass through the steel turnstiles of the Qalandia checkpoint.

Along the Gazan coastline they heard the fireworks, too, booming over the confined territory to which Israel still controls entry and exit alongside Egypt, its residents shut off from worlds beyond. Palestinians in the Galilee village of Fassuta may come and go as they please, but they also confront the consequences of 1967 through discrimination in daily life as non-Jews in a Jewish state. One former resident of the village recently wrote that "the choice between life in Israel and life in the West Bank is a choice between two systems of Israeli aggression, different only in their manifestations. Both are deadly and soul-crushing."³² The desolate communities of East Jerusalem, in Wadi al-Joz and along the seam line,

29. Jonathan Lis, "Israel to Commemorate Six Day War in Event at West Bank Settlement of Gush Etzion," *Haaretz*, April 6, 2017, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.781878>.

30. Tamara Zieve, "WZO Invites Young Jews Worldwide to Celebrate Jerusalem Day in Israel," *Jerusalem Post*, February 27, 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/WZO-invites-young-Jews-worldwide-to-celebrate-Jerusalem-Day-in-Israel-482733>. On the unsettled status of East Jerusalem, see Ian Lustick, "Has Israel Annexed East Jerusalem?," *Middle East Policy* 5.1 (1997): 34–45.

31. See Amira Hass, "Palestinians to High Court: Israel's West Bank Land Claim will Cut Bethlehem off From South," *Haaretz*, March 12, 2013, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/palestinians-to-high-court-israel-s-west-bank-land-claim-will-cut-bethlehem-off-from-south.premium-1.508988>.

32. Fida Jiryis, "Diary," *London Review of Books* 39.9 (2017): 40–41.

heard the celebratory fireworks as well. The noise would not have reached the 1967 refugees in Jordan, Egypt, and those left in war-ravaged Syria—many of whom are double refugees of the 1948 war, known in Arabic as the *Nakba* (the Catastrophe). Their collective experience enduring daily life over five decades since the unresolved conquests of 1967 underscores another passage of time, marked by fragmented suffering that most in Israel do not care to know.

“A nation that is concerned for its future must always look back at its past,” Israeli Education Minister Naftali Bennett said ahead of the celebrations in the West Bank.³³ He may not have anticipated the valence of his words. It is easy to look back and revel in conquest, but it is much harder to see the consequences for the vanquished—and sometimes for the victor, even more.

33. Lis, “Israel to Commemorate Six-Day War.”