

Commemoration of 70th Anniversary of Death of Vladimir Jabotinsky
Lecture
by
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There are few men or women who are remembered, let alone honored, 70 years after they've died. But we do remember Vladimir "Ze'ev" Jabotinsky – and for good reason. Or, I should say, for good reasons. I'll name three:

First, he played an instrumental role in the success of a great cause -- the reconstitution of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel.

Second, in addition to his remarkable accomplishments, he was a man of remarkable character and ideas.

And third, Jabotinsky's thoughts on the Arab-Jewish conflict over Palestine are not merely of historical interest; they contain insights applicable today.

I appreciate the work that Herb Zweibon, Rael Isaac, Ruth King and others in Americans for a Safe Israel have done to keep alive Jabotinsky's memory and mentality. They and I were good friends of Shmuel Katz, a formidable historical figure in his own right. Shmuel was a colleague of Jabotinsky, a leader of the Irgun, a Herut member of Israel's first parliament, and eventually Jabotinsky's biographer. Shmuel died two years ago and he is sorely missed.

I. Accomplishments

Shmuel Katz's superb two-volume examination of Jabotinsky's life, entitled *Lone Wolf*, catalogues the long and multifarious list of Jabotinsky's contributions to Jewish history. Reviewing that list brings to mind the Passover song "Dayenu" ["enough for us"].

Jabotinsky would occupy a place of honor in history if he'd done nothing other than pen his writings and deliver his celebrated multilingual orations on Jewish nationalism. He described the misery and vulnerability of the Jews in exile, especially in Europe. He made the case for what he called humanitarian Zionism, setting out the moral, legal, historical and practical arguments in favor of a Jewish state in Palestine. In the 1930s, he foresaw and warned over and over again of the catastrophe to which Europe's Jews were heading if they didn't move themselves by the millions to the Land of Israel. Before the Nazis invaded Poland, he famously (and, alas, vainly)

told the Jews of Warsaw that they should liquidate the diaspora or the diaspora would surely liquidate them.

Jabotinsky would deserve grateful remembrance from the Jews even just for his role in promoting Hebrew. In the early years of the 20th century, as Zionists contended over whether Hebrew or Yiddish should be the language of the eventual Jewish state, Jabotinsky helped ensure that Zionism would bring about the miraculous revivification of the Hebrew tongue. Though he loved Yiddish, he recognized it as “sectional.” He warned repeatedly that the Yiddishists risked excluding from the Zionist cause the *Sephardim* and the Jews of the Caucasus, Turkistan, Persia and elsewhere.

He made the work of the great Zionist poet Bialik available to the mass of Russian Jewry by translating the poems from Hebrew into Russian. Jabotinsky also translated into Hebrew the poetry of Dante and Edgar Allen Poe. And he promoted new forms of Hebrew instruction and Jewish education. He can fairly be described as a father of what we in America call the Jewish day-school movement.

Jabotinsky would have a secure place in Jewish memory simply for his leadership of the Zionist Revisionists, the political movement based on his secular liberal philosophy of Jewish national rights. His political influence was widespread in his day and remains potent even now. Though Ben Gurion is admired by many Israelis, no political leaders in Israel anymore describe themselves as Ben Gurionites. None describe themselves as Weizmannites. But many proudly think of themselves as Jabotinskyites, followers of this rational, pragmatic, unapologetic, security-minded, non-socialist Jewish nationalist. Dayenu!

But I haven't yet mentioned his chief contribution to Jewish history. That was his role as exponent and organizer of Jewish self-defense. He invented Jewish military organization in the modern world.

Jabotinsky understood that the physical vulnerability of a people or a nation has both physical and metaphysical effects. To protect their lives and property and for the sake of their personal dignity and aspirations for national independence, Jabotinsky instructed the Jews, scattered and unarmed, on the indispensability of resistance, military power and self-defense, with special emphasis on the word “self.”

This was a paramount theme of his life. In his early manhood, he organized a Jewish group to fight violent antisemites in his home city of Odessa. During World War I, he was the prime mover for the creation of a Jewish Legion in the British army that would help conquer Palestine. After that war, as the Arabs in the Jerusalem area prepared their first major anti-Jewish program, Jabotinsky put together a Jewish defense organization known as the Hagana, a forerunner of the

underground militia of the same name. Jabotinsky created Betar, the Zionist youth organization that trained its members in military discipline and skills. Jabotinsky provided inspiration and leadership to the Irgun, one of the underground military organizations in Mandate Palestine. And when he died in New York seventy years ago, he was laboring to the point of exhaustion to create a Jewish army to fight Hitler.

The effort to create the Jewish Legion during World War I deserves a few more words. Jabotinsky had the strategic insight that Britain might take Palestine from the Ottomans, that the Zionist cause could be made or broken by British policy and that the Jews should take an active part – politically and militarily – in effecting Palestine’s liberation. He often quarreled in later years with Chaim Weizmann, but Jabotinsky and Weizmann saw eye-to-eye that the then top officials of the World Zionist Organization were wrong to adopt a policy of neutrality in the war. Though merely a journalist at the time, Jabotinsky led an effort over several years to persuade British officials to create a Jewish fighting force for use in a Palestine campaign.

The first fruit of that effort was the Zion Mule Corps, which fought for the British not in Palestine but in the bloody battle for Gallipoli. Then, in the summer of 1917, just three months before the Balfour Declaration, the British government agreed to create a Jewish Legion for use in Palestine. Thirty-seven years old, Jabotinsky joined as an enlisted man and was eventually promoted to lieutenant.

In his book, *The Story of the Jewish Legion*¹, Jabotinsky describes how the first Jewish battalion, soon to be deployed abroad, marched through London behind its British commander, Colonel John Henry Patterson.

There were tens of thousands of Jews in the streets, at the windows and on the roofs. Blue-white flags were over every shop door; women crying with joy, old Jews with fluttering beards murmuring, ‘*shehecheyanu*’; Patterson on his horse, laughing and bowing, and wearing a rose which a girl had thrown him from a balcony; and the boys, those “tailors,” shoulder to shoulder, their bayonets dead level, each step like a single clap of thunder, clean, proud, drunk with the national anthem, with the noise of the crowds, and with the sense of a holy mission, unexampled since the day Bar-Kochba, in Betar, not knowing whether there would ever be others to follow and to take up the struggle, threw himself upon his sword.

¹ Vladimir Jabotinsky, *The Story of the Jewish Legion* (New York: Bernard Ackerman, Incorporated, 1945), p. 104.

Jabotinsky concludes:

Long life to you, my “tailors” of Whitechapel and SoHo, Leeds and Manchester! You were good tailors: you found the torn rags of Jewish honor in the street and you sewed them together—to make a beautiful, whole and everlasting flag.

In 1981 an Israeli historian, lecturing on Jabotinsky’s place in Jewish history, said:

[W]e see that one supreme principle guided him throughout: resistance to subjugation. Along with this he advocated a multi-faceted force, including military force, to serve as the instrument of that resistance.

Few people today can see the novelty that all this represented. Is it not natural for any people to resist subjugation and forge the instruments of its defense? It is; but for the great majority of the Jewish people this was a dubious proposition until the turn of the [20th] century. That it has ceased to be so since that time testifies to the revolution that Jabotinsky brought about in our thinking on these matters.

We can now appreciate the depth of the revolution which Jabotinsky, by his preaching of resistance, effected in our thinking, our moral values and the way we were to conceive our problem as a nation among the nations. *He taught resistance to a people who, for many generations, had lost the capacity and the will to resist.*²

The Israeli historian who wrote that is Benzion Netanyahu, the father of the prime minister.

II. Character and philosophy

As interesting as Jabotinsky was for his accomplishments I find it equally fascinating to consider his character and his thoughts. He was an intellectual and a man of letters, but by no means an academic, much less a *luftmensch*. He combined erudition and action. He combined a profoundly humane liberalism with the blunt acknowledgement of the indispensability of military power. He combined unapologetic defense of the interests of the Jewish people and generous appreciation of the interests, motives and cultures of other peoples, including those in

² Benzion Netanyahu, “Jabotinsky’s Place in the History of the Jewish People,” reprint of address delivered at the University of Haifa on January 13, 1981 marking the 100th anniversary of Jabotinsky’s birth. Faculty of Humanities, University of Haifa.

conflict with the Jews. His political advocacy was plain-spoken and intense, but carefully reasoned and respectful in tone. He was charming and bighearted. And he delighted in humor.

One of his most salient traits – if it’s right to call it a trait of his – is the peculiar malignancy of the condemnations he elicited in his day and even now from his political opponents on the left. Remarkably and admirably, he did not respond in kind.

Jabotinsky has often been smeared as a fascist. Israeli socialists routinely threw the term at him. The epithet proved plausible for various reasons – because he opposed Marxist policies and Bolshevik practices; because he argued that the Zionists would be unsuccessful in trying to buy off the Palestinian Arabs with marginal political concessions; and because he insisted on the importance of Jewish military power. Also, because the Labor Party leadership controlled the major organs of the Jewish community in Palestine – they owned the megaphones, as it were – and they continued to do so for decades after the State of Israel came into being.

But Jabotinsky was decidedly no fascist. Rather, he was part of that far-too-small community in inter-war intellectual circles that had no sympathy for the fascists or the communists. Over and over again in his publications and speeches, he promoted emphatically liberal and democratic views. He wrote movingly of the sovereignty of each individual. One of his most famous pronouncements was that every man is a king and every woman a queen. He traced the idea to the Bible, but stressed that it applied not only to Jews but to all human beings. He wrote:³

When I look for the kernel of that new Jewish mentality of which the Betar movement is, so far, the most advanced expression, I find it in the idea of Man’s Royalty. In so far as it applies to the Jew it is expressed in our Betar anthem:

Even in distress the Jew is a prince.
No matter if a slave or a tramp,
You were created son of kings,
Crowned with the diadem of David ...

I who wrote it meant it apply to any man, Grecian or Bantu, Nordic or Eskimo. They were all formed in God’s image: that is what we have learnt from the Bible’s first chapter.

“[T]he first consequence of ‘every man a king’ is, obviously, universal equality,” Jabotinsky wrote, and “the second consequence [is] individual liberty.”

³ *From the Pen of Jabotinsky* (Capetown: Unie-Volkspers BPK, 1941), pp. 60-61.

Some of his opponents cited Jabotinsky's exaltation of the idea of a Jewish state as evidence of a fascist mentality. But it is clear that Jabotinsky was committed "above all" to the creation of such a state because he viewed it as a matter of life and death for millions of people. Without a state, he correctly predicted, millions of Jews in Europe would be killed. This naturally made issues of individual liberty and equality secondary to the issue of national survival. His concept of a proper state, however, was a thorough repudiation of all totalitarian practices. He praised what he saw as the ancient Jewish tradition that "*detests* the very idea of state power, and only tolerates it in so far as it is indispensable and inevitable." Jabotinsky declared:

In every-man's life and activity—in his individual 'kingdom'—as much as possible should be left outside of the state's interference; the best rule would be that as long as one 'king' does not encroach upon his neighbour's 'sovereignty', he should be left alone; if that is really impossible, for there unfortunately are dangers without and needs within which compel a collective effort, let it be strictly limited to the really inevitable minimum.⁴

He asserted that the best Jewish tradition produced "a mentality to which a 'totalitarian' state would be anathema." His common sense was charming: "Of course, since we haven't got it, [a Jewish state] is our ideal to which we are prepared to sacrifice everything else. But it does not mean that we want that future state to be a cage, a nuisance and a nightmare of do's and don'ts. We want it to be as unencumbered by do's and don'ts as possible; but of course, above all, and first of all, we want it to be."⁵ It undoubtedly infuriated his Marxist opponents that he identified communism as well as fascism as totalitarian poison.

III. The Arabs vs. the Jews in Palestine

Nowhere did Jabotinsky display his contrarianism more stunningly than in his discussion of Arab opposition to the Jewish state.

To understand his views we must first appreciate the context. WWI destroyed the Ottoman Empire, ending hundreds of years of the Turks' rule over their so-called Asiatic provinces, which included Syria and Lebanon, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Arabia. The allies, as victors, had the right under international law to annex the land they conquered. They didn't do so, however. Instead they recognized Arab sovereignty right away in Arabia. And they agreed to hold Mesopotamia and Syria and Lebanon in trust, under formal legal instruments called mandates, for the benefit of the inhabitants. After building the capacity for self-government, the Arab nation from the Tarsus mountains to the Indian Ocean would achieve independence within

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

several sovereign states. Given their rights as conquerors, acquired at the cost of much blood and treasure, the victorious allies considered these arrangements to be generous to the Arabs, especially as the vast majority of the Arabs fought in the Great War on the Ottomans' side – the enemy side, the losing side.

Palestine also would come under a mandate, but the named beneficiary was not the Arabs; it was the Jewish people. Many new states were born on the ruins of empires after World War I and the allies decided that Palestine should be held open for the return of the Jewish people to their ancient homeland. Britain's foreign secretary described Palestine as a small notch of land in the vastness of the Middle East. If the Jews resettled in Palestine in large enough numbers to become a majority, the idea was that they would eventually be permitted to establish a Jewish state there. This could help solve the world's long-running humanitarian disaster known as the Jewish Problem – and it would fulfill the promise of the Balfour Declaration, which the British government issued during the war to win international Jewish support for the allied war effort. Zionist leaders – Jabotinsky, Weizmann and others – had contributed valuably to that effort and key British officials at the time felt a strong sense of obligation to the Zionists. After allied officials drafted the Palestine mandate, the League of Nations endorsed it. It became the legal framework for Palestine.

Supporters of the Palestine mandate did not believe they were wronging the Arabs of Palestine, though they understood that those Arabs opposed the plan for a Jewish state. The mandate made an important distinction between the Arabs' rights as individuals and their collective rights as a nation. Arab nationalist leaders at the time insisted that there was but one Arab nation. So supporters of the Palestine mandate argued that the postwar settlement would vindicate *collective* Arab rights amply in Syria, Mesopotamia, Arabia and elsewhere. As for *individual* rights, the Palestine mandate aimed to ensure that the Arabs of Palestine, even when a minority, would have their *personal* civil and property rights respected. The Arabs would of course prefer to remain the majority in Palestine, but if the Arabs were to be the majority everywhere they lived, then the Jews could be the majority nowhere in the world.

Anyhow, soon after the Palestine mandate was drafted and Britain accepted the role of mandatory power, British officials divided Palestine east of the Jordan River from Palestine west of the Jordan River and excluded the eastern part – called Transjordan – from the Jewish national home. Britain created an Arab administration for Transjordan, which remained under the Palestine mandate until 1946. So the Arabs retained their majority status – and eventually won national independence – even in three quarters of Mandate Palestine, which was originally expected to be part of the Jewish national home.

Arab opposition to Zionism remained strong in western Palestine, which in time came commonly to be referred to simply as Palestine. In the 1930s, Arab violence against the Jews there moved

the British government to create a royal commission to propose a new policy. Jabotinsky was one of the people who gave testimony.

It was known that the commissioners were considering a proposal to partition western Palestine between the Arabs and the Jews. They were also considering British proposals to expel the Arabs from the portion to be allocated to the Jews. Jabotinsky reminded the commission that Jews were already banned from settling in Transjordan and he argued against any further partitioning of Palestine. It is ironic that Jabotinsky was considered a hardliner and his opponents in the Zionist movement were considered moderates. (Jabotinsky joked about being called a “militarist” by the “vegetarians.”) Yet leading “moderates” in the Zionist leadership were open to the idea of a forced population transfer, while Jabotinsky rejected it categorically as a violation of the principle of individual rights.

Jabotinsky insisted on respect for Jewish rights and opposed various proposals to compromise them. What is fascinating is that he justified his position not by denying the claims of Palestine’s Arabs but by acknowledging those claims, paying respect to the Arabs’ tenacious attachment to them and warning proponents of compromise against believing that the Arabs can be bought off cheaply. Jabotinsky was not against compromise in principle, but he opposed compromises that would damage the Jews’ position without satisfying the Arabs and ending the conflict.

In his testimony, he said he has “the profoundest feeling for the Arab case, in so far as that Arab case is not exaggerated.” He stated that there was no “individual hardship to the Arabs of Palestine as men” deriving from Jewish settlement; indeed the economic opportunities created by the Jews had induced many Arabs in surrounding countries to immigrate to Palestine. He stressed that, in his view, “there is no question of ousting the Arabs.” He said that Palestine was big enough for the Arabs and “many millions of Jews.”

What I do not deny [Jabotinsky declared] is that in that process the Arabs of Palestine will necessarily become a minority in the country of Palestine. What I do deny is that *that* is a hardship. It is not a hardship on any race, any nation, possessing so many National States now and so many more National States in the future. One fraction, one branch of that race, and not a big one, will have to live in someone else’s State: well, that is the case with all the mightiest nations of the world.

He made his point with a stunning analogy:

So when we hear the Arab claim confronted with the Jewish claim; I fully understand that any minority would prefer to be a majority, it is quite understandable that the Arabs of Palestine would also prefer Palestine to be the Arab State No. 4, No. 5, or No. 6—that I

quite understand; but when the Arab claim is confronted with our Jewish demand to be saved, it is like the claims of appetite versus the claims of starvation.⁶

Jabotinsky had a concept of the Arab-Jewish conflict in Palestine that was fundamentally at odds with that of the would-be peacemakers throughout the twentieth century down to the present day. His concept was that the Arabs were serious about their claims and their interests, opposed Zionism in principle for nationalistic and religious reasons and were as dedicated to upholding their principles as the Jews were in defending the idea and then the fact of a Jewish state.

From the earliest days of the Palestine mandate forward, peacemaking efforts were premised on the idea that the conflict was not fundamental, was not about principles. British officials thought they could persuade Arab enemies of Zionism to make peace by limiting Jewish immigration, restricting Jewish land purchases or creating Arab political bodies. Jabotinsky told the British that they were missing the Arabs' point.

In recent decades, it has been U.S. not British officials who have taken the lead in trying to engineer Arab-Israeli peace and they have done so in similar fashion by focusing on practical questions – the so-called “final status” issues – rather than recognize the profound nature of Palestinian Arab opposition to Israel. Hence for forty years or so, U.S. officials have repeatedly banged their heads against a wall. Time and again, they push the parties to discuss boundary lines, water rights, Jewish settlements, security arrangements, Jerusalem, etc., etc. The discussions go round and round and never achieve peace. This would not surprise Jabotinsky.

Jabotinsky said there will be peace only if the Arabs become persuaded that Israel is truly indestructible and the Arabs realize that they cannot get their first choice, which is Arab control of all of Palestine. Only then might it be possible that Palestine's Arabs will compromise with the Jews and conclude peace.

The current campaign to delegitimize the Jewish state – to depict Israel as a nation born in aggression against the Arabs, lawless and immoral, deserving of contempt, denunciation and isolation – shows that Israel's enemies retain the view that Israel is vulnerable. They hope Israel will go the way of the Soviet Union or the regime of apartheid South Africa.

U.S. officials should heed the lessons of history. After so many years of fruitless diplomacy, they should recognize that Jabotinsky had a point when he argued against condescending to the Arabs and failing to take their words, principles and interests seriously.

⁶ V. Jabotinsky, *Evidence Submitted to the Palestine Royal Commission, House of Lords, London, February 11th, 1937* (London: New Zionist Press, 1937).

Peace may some day come to Palestine. But it will not result from the current diplomacy conducted by officials who learn nothing and forget nothing. It may come if the Palestinian people finally get good leadership, forward-looking men and women who are persuaded that Israel is here to stay and who believe that Palestinian nationalism should be more than persistent, debilitating, hateful opposition to Zionism. But Israel's enemies include not just Palestinians and not just Arabs. The Iranian regime is an important element in the conflict.

I'm afraid I have to end on a rather sober note. But that's not really inappropriate in a talk about Jabotinsky. Peace is a great blessing and it is worth pursuing. But U.S. officials should become realistic about the nature of the conflict and the prospects for diplomatic progress. And Israelis cannot expect soon to be relieved of the necessity to maintain the military defenses that Jabotinsky pioneered.

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