

Leopold Weiss and Jacob de Haan

(*The Road to Mecca*, by Muhammad Asad, revised fourth edition, Fons Vitae Publishing, 1980, first published in 1954, pages 91-96, 98-99.)

I often sat on the stone balustrade below the Jaffa Gate and watched the throng of people going into or coming out of the Old City. Here they rubbed against each other, jostled one another, Arab and Jew, all possible variations of both. There were the strong-boned *fellahin* [Arab peasants] with their white or brown headcloths or orange-coloured turbans. There were beduins [desert Arabs] with sharp, clear-cut and, almost without exception, lean faces, wearing their cloaks in a strangely self-confident manner, frequently with hands on hips and elbows wide apart, as if they took it for granted that everyone would make way for them. There were peasant women in black or blue calico dresses embroidered in white across the bosom, often carrying baskets on their heads and moving with a supple, easy grace. Seen from behind, many a woman of sixty could be taken for a young girl. Their eyes also seemed to remain clear and untouched by age—unless they happened to be affected by trachoma, that evil ‘Egyptian’ eye disease which is the curse of all countries east of the Mediterranean.

And there were the Jews: the indigenous Jews, wearing a *tarbush* [hat shaped like an inverted, truncated cone] and a wide, voluminous cloak, in their facial type strongly resembling the Arabs; Jews from Poland and Russia, who seemed to carry with them so much of the smallness and narrowness of their past lives in Europe that it was surprising to think they claimed to be of the same stock as the proud Jew from Morocco or Tunisia in his white *burnus* [hooded cloak]. But although the European Jews were so obviously out of all harmony with the picture that surrounded them, it was they who set the tone of Jewish life and politics and thus seemed to be responsible for the almost visible friction between Jews and Arabs.

What did the average European know of the Arabs in those days? Practically nothing. When he came to the Near East he brought with him some romantic and erroneous notions; and if he was well-intentioned and intellectually honest, he had to admit that he had no idea at all about the Arabs. I, too, before I came to Palestine, had never thought of it as an Arab land. I had, of course, vaguely known that ‘some’ Arabs lived there, but I imagined them to be only nomads in desert tents and idyllic oasis dwellers. Because most of what I had read about Palestine in earlier days had been written by Zionists—who naturally had only their own problems in view—I had not realized that the towns also were full of Arabs—that, in fact, in 1922 there lived in Palestine nearly five Arabs to every Jew, and that, therefore, it was an Arab country to a far higher degree than a country of Jews.

When I remarked on this to Mr. Ussyshkin, chairman of the Zionist Committee of Action, whom I met during that time, I had the impression that the Zionists were not inclined to give much consideration to the fact of Arab majority; nor did they seem to attribute any real importance to the Arabs’ opposition to Zionism. Mr. Ussyshkin’s response showed nothing but contempt for the Arabs:

'There is no real Arab movement here against us; that is, no movement with roots in the people. All that you regard as opposition is in reality nothing but the shouting of a few disgruntled agitators. It will collapse of itself within a few months or at most a few years.'

This argument was far from satisfactory to me. From the very beginning I had the feeling that the whole idea of Jewish settlement in Palestine was artificial and, what was worse, that it threatened to transfer all the complications and insoluble problems of European life into a country which might have remained happier without them. The Jews were not really coming to it as one returns to one's homeland; they were rather bent on *making* it into a homeland conceived on European patterns and with European aims. In short, they were strangers within the gates. And so I did not find anything wrong in the Arabs' determined resistance to the idea of a Jewish homeland in their midst; on the contrary, I immediately realized that it was the Arabs who were being imposed upon and were rightly defending themselves against such an imposition.

In the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which promised the Jews a 'national home' in Palestine, I saw a cruel political manoeuvre designed to foster the old principle, common to all colonial powers, of 'divide and rule.' In the case of Palestine, this principle was the more flagrant as in 1916 the British had promised the then ruler of Mecca, Sharif Husayn, as a price for his help against the Turks, an independent Arab state which was to comprise all countries between the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf. They not only broke their promise a year later by concluding with France the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement (which established French Dominion over Syria and the Lebanon), but also, by implication, excluded Palestine from the obligations they had assumed with regard to the Arabs.

Although of Jewish origin myself, I conceived from the outset a strong objection to Zionism. Apart from my personal sympathy for the Arabs, I considered it immoral that immigrants, assisted by a foreign Great Power, should come from abroad with the avowed intention of attaining to majority in the country and thus to dispossess the people whose country it had been since time immemorial. Consequently, I was inclined to take the side of the Arabs whenever the Jewish-Arab question was brought up—which, of course, happened very often. This attitude of mine was beyond the comprehension of practically all the Jews with whom I came in contact during those months. They could not understand what I saw in the Arabs who, according to them, were no more than a mass of backward people whom they looked upon with a feeling not much different from the European settlers in Central Africa. They were not in the least interested in what the Arabs thought; almost none of them took pains to learn Arabic; and everyone accepted without question the dictum that Palestine was the rightful heritage of the Jews.

I still remember a brief discussion I had on this score with Dr. Chaim Weizmann, the undisputed leader of the Zionist movement. He had come on one of his periodic visits to Palestine (his permanent residence was, I believe, in London), and I met him in the house of a Jewish friend. One could not but be impressed by the boundless energy of this man—an energy that manifested itself even in his bodily movements, in the long, springy stride with which he paced up and down the room—and by the power of intellect revealed in the broad forehead and the penetrating glance of his eyes.

He was talking of the financial difficulties which were besetting the dream of a Jewish National Home, and the insufficient response to this dream among people abroad; and I had the disturbing impression that even he, like most of the other Zionists, was inclined to transfer the moral responsibility for all that was happening in Palestine to the 'outside world.' This impelled me to break through the deferential hush with which all the other people present were listening to him, and to ask:

'And what about the Arabs?'

I must have committed a *faux pas* by thus bringing a jarring note into the conversation, for Dr. Weizmann turned his face slowly toward me, put down the cup he had been holding in his hand, and repeated my question:

'What about the Arabs...?'

'Well—how can you ever hope to make Palestine your homeland in the face of the vehement opposition of the Arabs who, after all, are in the majority in this country?'

The Zionist leader shrugged his shoulders and answered drily: 'We expect they won't be in a majority after a few years.'

'Perhaps so. You have been dealing with this problem for years and must know the situation better than I do. But quite apart from the political difficulties which Arab opposition may or may not put in your way—does not the moral aspect of the question ever bother you? Don't you think that it is wrong on your part to displace the people who have always lived in this country?'

'But it is *our* country,' replied Dr. Weizmann, raising his eyebrows. 'We are doing no more than taking back what we have been wrongly deprived of.'

'But you have been away from Palestine for nearly two thousand years! Before that you had ruled this country, and hardly ever the whole of it, for less than five hundred years. Don't you think that the Arabs could, with equal justification, demand Spain for themselves—for, after all, they held sway in Spain for nearly seven hundred years and lost it entirely only five hundred years ago?'

Dr. Weizmann had become visibly impatient: 'Nonsense. The Arabs had only *conquered* Spain; it had never been their original homeland, and so it was only right that in the end they were driven out by the Spaniards.'

'Forgive me,' I retorted, 'but it seems to me that there is some historical oversight here. After all, the Hebrews also came as conquerors to Palestine. Long before them were many other Semitic and non-Semitic tribes settled here—the Amorites, the Edomites, the Philistines, the Moabites, the Hittites. Those tribes continued living here even in the days of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. They continued living here after the Romans drove our ancestors away. They are living here today. The Arabs who settled in Syria and

Palestine after their conquest in the seventh century were always only a small minority of the population; the rest of what we describe today as Palestinian or Syrian 'Arabs' are in reality only the Arabized, original inhabitants of the country. Some of them became Muslims in the course of centuries, others remained Christians; the Muslims naturally inter-married with their co-religionists from Arabia. But can you deny that the bulk of those people in Palestine, who speak Arabic, whether Muslims or Christians, are direct-line descendants of the original inhabitants: original in the sense of having lived in this country centuries before the Hebrews came to it.

Dr. Weizmann smiled politely at my outburst and turned the conversation to other topics.

I did not feel happy about the outcome of my intervention. I had of course not expected any of those present—least of all Dr. Weizmann himself—to subscribe to my conviction that the Zionist idea was highly vulnerable on the moral plane: but I had hoped that my defence of the Arab cause would at least give rise to some sort of uneasiness on the part of the Zionist leadership—an uneasiness which might bring about more introspection and thus, perhaps, a greater readiness to admit the existence of a possible moral right in the opposition of the Arabs... None of this had come about. Instead, I found myself facing a blank wall of staring eyes: a censorious disapproval of my temerity, which dared question the unquestionable right of the Jews to the land of their forefathers...

How was it possible, I wondered, for people endowed with so much creative intelligence as the Jews to think of the Zionist-Arab conflict in Jewish terms alone? Did they not realize that the problem of the Jews in Palestine could, in the long run, be solved only through friendly co-operation with the Arabs? Were they so hopelessly blind to the painful future which their policy must bring? —to the struggles, the bitterness and hatred to which the Jewish island, even if temporarily successful, would forever remain exposed in the midst of a hostile Arab sea?

And how strange, I thought, that a nation which had suffered so many wrongs in the course of its long and sorrowful diaspora was now, in single-minded pursuit of its own goal, ready to inflict a grievous wrong on another nation—and a nation, too, that was innocent of all that past Jewish suffering. Such a phenomenon, I knew, was not unknown to history; but it made me, none the less, very sad to see it enacted before my eyes.

...I now had many friends in Palestine, both Jews and Arabs. The Zionists, it is true, looked upon me with some sort of puzzled suspicion because of the sympathy for the Arabs which was so apparent in my dispatches to the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Evidently they could not make up their minds whether I had been 'bought' by the Arabs (for in Zionist Palestine people had become accustomed to explain almost every happening in terms of money) or whether I was simply a freakish intellectual in love with the exotic. But not all Jews living in Palestine at that time were Zionists. Some of them had come there not in pursuit of a political aim, but out of a religious longing for the Holy Land and its Biblical associations.

To this group belonged my Dutch friend Jacob de Haan, a small, plump, blond-bearded man in his early forties, who had formerly taught law at one of the leading universities in Holland and was now special correspondent of the Amsterdam *Handelsblad* and the London *Daily Express*. A man of deep religious convictions—as ‘orthodox’ as any Jew of Eastern Europe—he did not approve of the idea of Zionism, for he believed that the return of his people to the Promised Land had to await the coming of the Messiah.

“We Jews,’ he said to me on more than one occasion, ‘were driven away from the Holy Land and scattered all over the world because we had fallen short of the task God had conferred upon us. We had been chosen by Him to preach His Word, but in our stubborn pride we began to believe that He had made us a “chosen nation” for our own sakes—and thus we betrayed Him. Now nothing remains for us but to repent and to cleanse our hearts; and when we become worthy once again to be the hearers of His message, He will send a Messiah to lead His servants back to the Promised Land...’

‘But,’ I asked, ‘does not this Messianic idea underlie the Zionist movement as well? You know that I do not approve of it: but is it not a natural desire of every people to have a national home of its own?’

Dr. de Haan looked at me quizzically: ‘Do you think that history is but a series of accidents? I don’t. It was not without a purpose that God made us lose our land and dispersed us; but the Zionists do not want to admit this to themselves. They suffer from the same spiritual blindness that caused our downfall. The two thousand years of Jewish exile and unhappiness have taught them nothing. Instead of making an attempt to understand the innermost causes of our unhappiness, they now try to circumvent it, as it were, by building a “national home” on foundations provided by Western power politics; and in the process of building a national home, they are committing the crime of depriving another people of its home.’

Jacob de Haan’s political views naturally made him most unpopular with the Zionists (indeed, a short time after I left Palestine, I was shocked to learn that he had been shot down one night by terrorists). When I knew him, his social intercourse was limited to a very few Jews of his own way of thought, some Europeans, and Arabs. For the Arabs he seemed to have a great affection, and they, on their part, thought highly of him and frequently invited him to their houses. As a matter of fact, at that period they were not yet universally prejudiced against Jews as such. It was only subsequent to the Balfour Declaration—that is, after centuries of good-neighbourly relations and a consciousness of racial kinship—that the Arabs had begun to look upon the Jews as political enemies; but even in the changed circumstances of the early Twenties, they still clearly differentiated between Zionists and Jews who were friendly toward them like Dr. de Haan.