4. Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* and *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*

Ari Shavit, "Survival of the Fittest? An Interview with Benny Morris" and "Lydda, 1948"

Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987 and *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. The text below is from the 2004 edition.

Dr. Benny Morris (1948–) is a Middle East Studies faculty member at Ben-Gurion University in Beersheba, Israel. In addition to authoring several books on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he worked as a journalist at the *Jerusalem Post* and has written for various other news publications, including the *New York Times*, the *New Republic*, and the *New York Review of Books*.

In examining the causes of the Arab exodus from Palestine over 1947–1949, accurate quantification is impossible. I have tried to show that the exodus occurred in stages and that causation was multi-layered: A Haifa merchant did not leave only because of the weeks or months of sniping and bombings; or because business was getting bad; or because of intimidation and extortion by irregulars; or because he feared the collapse of law and order when the British left; or because he feared for his prospects and livelihood under Jewish rule. He left because of the accumulation of all these factors. And the mass of Haifaites who fled in his wake, at the end of April–early May 1948, did not flee only as a result of the Arab militia collapse and Haganah conquest of April 21–22. They fled because of the cumulative effect of the elite's departure, the snipings, and bombings, and material privations, unemployment and chaos during the previous months; and because of their local leaders' instructions to leave, issued on April 22; and because of the follow up orders by the AHC [Arab Higher Committee] to continue departing; and because of IZL [The Irgun—אצ"ל] and Haganah activities and pressures during the days after the conquest; and because of the prospect of life under Jewish rule. (598)

What happened in Palestine/Israel over 1947–1949 was so complex and varied, the situation radically changing from date to date and place to place, that a single-cause explanation of the exodus from most sites is untenable. At most, one can say that certain causes were important in certain areas at certain times, with a general shift in the spring of 1948 from precedence of cumulative internal Arab factors—lack of leadership, economic problems, breakdown of law and order—to a primacy of external, compulsive causes: Haganah/IDF [Israeli Defense Force] attacks and expulsions, fear of Jewish attacks and atrocities, lack of help from the Arab world and the AHC and a feeling of impotence and abandonment, and orders from Arab officials and commanders to leave. In general, throughout the war, the final and decisive precipitant to flight in most places was Haganah, IZL, LHI [Lehi], or IDF attack or the inhabitants' fear of imminent attack. During the second half of 1948, international concern about the refugee problem mounted. Concern translated into pressure. This pressure, initiated by [Folke] Bernadotte and the Arab states in the summer of 1948, increased as the months passed, as the number of refugees swelled, as their physical plight became more acute and as the discomfort of their Arab hosts grew. The problem moved to the forefront of every discussion of the Middle East crisis and the Arabs made their agreement to a settlement, nay, even to meaningful negotiations, with Israel contingent on a solution of the problem by repatriation. (599)

Ari Shavit, "Survival of the Fittest? An Interview with Benny Morris," *Haaretz*, January 08, 2004

Ari Shavit (1957–) has been a columnist for *Haaretz* since 1995. His work has also appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and *Politico*.

You went through an interesting process. You went to research Ben-Gurion and the Zionist establishment critically, but in the end you actually identify with them. You are as tough in your words as they were in their deeds.

You may be right. Because I investigated the conflict in depth, I was forced to cope with the in-depth questions that those people coped with. I understood the problematic character of the situation they faced and maybe I adopted part of their universe of concepts. But I do not identify with Ben-Gurion. I think he made a serious historical mistake in 1948. Even though he understood the demographic issue and the need to establish a Jewish state without a large Arab minority, he got cold feet during the war. In the end, he faltered.

I'm not sure I understand. Are you saying that Ben-Gurion erred in expelling too few Arabs?

If he was already engaged in expulsion, maybe he should have done a complete job. I know that this stuns the Arabs and the liberals and the politically correct types. But my feeling is that this place would be quieter and know less suffering if the matter had been resolved once and for all. If Ben-Gurion had carried out a large expulsion and cleansed the whole country—the whole Land of Israel, as far as the Jordan River. It may yet turn out that this was his fatal mistake. If he had carried out a full expulsion—rather than a partial one—he would have stabilized the State of Israel for generations.

I find it hard to believe what I am hearing.

If the end of the story turns out to be a gloomy one for the Jews, it will be because Ben-Gurion did not complete the transfer in 1948. Because he left a large and volatile demographic reserve in the West Bank and Gaza and within Israel itself.

In his place, would you have expelled them all? All the Arabs in the country?

But I am not a statesman. I do not put myself in his place. But as an historian, I assert that a mistake was made here. Yes. The non-completion of the transfer was a mistake.

Ari Shavit, "Lydda, 1948," *New Yorker*, October 21, 2013

On July 11th, two platoons from the 3rd Battalion advanced from the conquered village of Daniyal toward the olive groves separating Ben Shemen from Lydda. The Arab militia defending the city held them off with machine-gun fire. In the meantime, the 89th Battalion, led by Moshe Dayan, had arrived in Ben Shemen. In the late afternoon, the battalion, consisting of a giant armored vehicle mounted with a cannon, menacing half-tracks, and machine-gun equipped jeeps, left Ben Shemen and stormed Lydda. In a forty-seven-minute-long blitz, dozens of Arabs were shot dead, including women, children, and old people. The 89th Battalion lost nine men. In the early evening, the two 3rd Battalion platoons were able to enter the city. Within hours, the soldiers held key positions in the city center and had confined thousands of Palestinian civilians in the Great Mosque.

The next day, according to "1948," by Benny Morris, two Jordanian armored vehicles entered the conquered city, setting off a new wave of

violence. The Jordanian Army was miles to the east, and the two vehicles were of no military significance, but some of the Arab citizens of Lydda thought that they were harbingers of liberation. Soldiers of the 3rd Battalion feared that they were in imminent danger of Jordanian assault. Some Palestinians fired on Israeli soldiers near a small mosque. Among the young combatants taking cover in a ditch nearby were Ben Shemen graduates, now in uniform. The brigade commander was a Ben Shemen graduate, too. He gave the order to open fire. Some of the soldiers threw hand grenades into Arab houses. One fired an anti-tank shell into the small mosque. In thirty minutes, two hundred and fifty Palestinians were killed. Zionism had carried out a massacre in the city of Lydda.

When the news reached the headquarters of Operation Larlar, in the Palestinian village of Yazur, the military commander, General Yigal Allon, asked Ben-Gurion what to do with the Arabs. Ben-Gurion waved his hand: Deport them. Hours later, Yitzhak Rabin, the operations officer, issued a written order to the Yiftach Brigade: "The inhabitants of Lydda must be expelled quickly, without regard to age."

The next day, negotiations were held in the rectory of St. George's Church between Shmarya Gutman, the newly appointed military governor of Lydda, and the Arab dignitaries of the occupied city. When negotiations ended, in the late morning of July 13, 1948, it was agreed that the Arabs in Lydda and the refugees residing there would be expelled from the city immediately. By evening, approximately thirty-five thousand Palestinian Arabs had left Lydda in a long column, marching past the Ben Shemen youth village and disappearing into the east. Zionism had obliterated the city of Lydda.

Lydda is the black box of Zionism. The truth is that Zionism could not bear the Arab city of Lydda. From the very beginning, there was a substantial contradiction between Zionism and Lydda. If Zionism was to exist, Lydda could not exist. If Lydda was to exist, Zionism could not exist. In retrospect, it's all too clear. When Siegfried Lehmann arrived in the Lydda Valley, in 1927, he should have seen that if a Jewish state was to exist in Palestine an Arab Lydda could not exist at its center. He should have known that Lydda was an obstacle blocking the road to a Jewish state, and that one day Zionism would have to remove it. But Dr. Lehmann did not see, and Zionism chose not to know. For decades, Jews succeeded in hiding from themselves the contradiction between their national movement and

Lydda. For forty-five years, Zionism pretended to be the Atid factory and the olive groves and the Ben Shemen youth village living in peace with Lydda. Then, in three days in the cataclysmic summer of 1948, Lydda was no more.

COMMENTARY BY DANIEL KURTZER

As of 2018, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that 44,400 people have been forced to leave their homes every day as a result of conflict and persecution. These people have taken refuge either in other parts of their countries or in neighboring states, and the UNHCR has taken on the responsibility to "protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide[,] ... to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees[,] ... to ensure that everyone can exercise the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge in another State, with the option to return home voluntarily, integrate locally or to resettle in a third country[,] ... [and] to help stateless people." UNHCR currently has responsibility for 19.9 million refugees worldwide.

An additional 5.4 million refugees are registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East. UNRWA, created by the UN in 1949, one year before UNHCR, is the only UN agency responsible for a single people. Initially assuming responsibility for about 750,000 refugees from the 1947–1949 Arab-Israeli war, the UNRWA rolls grew as it registered the children and grandchildren of the original refugees.

Everything about the Palestinian refugee issue and UNRWA is a source of deep and emotional controversy. Israelis and Palestinians differ sharply as to how and why the refugee situation came about—whether it resulted from the normal course of events in war when civilians flee their homes in search of safety and shelter; or whether Israel pursued a conscious policy of depopulating areas of the battlefield that it sought to integrate into the future State of Israel; or whether Arab leaders advised their people to move temporarily while Arab armies fought in Palestine.

This dispute over the origins of the problem has impacted the narratives of both Palestinians and the State of Israel. They dispute everything related to this issue. They dispute the number of refugees displaced and the definition of who is a refugee. They dispute whether the refugees should remain on the international agenda after so many years since the original displacement. And they dispute the core question of who was and is responsible for creating and resolving the problem. Palestinians want Israel to accept responsibility for causing the

problem; Israel rejects this notion, believing that acceptance of any responsibility would be tantamount to agreeing that its state was born in sin.

Israel and the Palestinians also differ fundamentally about what to do to resolve the refugee issue. Israel says that the refugees should be absorbed into a future Palestinian state or offered resettlement in place or elsewhere. Israel fears that a refugee influx into Israel would threaten the Jewish majority in the country. Israel also argues for the rehabilitation of existing refugee camps, arguing that the refugees should not be consigned to live in miserable conditions while awaiting a political solution. The Palestinians believe that United Nations General Assembly resolution 194 (1948) confers a "right of return" for the refugees to regain the homes they left in Palestine. Palestinians reject resettlement and typically oppose the rehabilitation of refugee camps, believing this is a backdoor method for resolving the refugee problem *in situ*.

The two sides also have divergent views about the role of UNRWA and the international community. Israel charges that UNRWA has perpetuated the refugee problem, rather than having worked to resolve it; Israel also objects to the refusal of the Palestinians and the failure of UNRWA to rehabilitate the refugee camps. Palestinians cling to UNRWA as the international confirmation of their status and rely upon UNRWA to meet the basic needs of the refugees.

Palestinian scholars have never challenged the prevailing Palestinian narrative. They are constrained, in the first instance, by the deep national emotions attached to this issue and the likelihood of ostracism if their research admitted any fault lines in the Palestinian narrative. They are also constrained by the relatively poor state of Palestinian archives. There is no central national archive, and much material has been lost over time as a result of war.

Israeli scholars, on the other hand, started researching this issue in the 1980s, as the state archives began declassifying relevant material that could be assessed against British and private holdings. The first scholar to mine the archives was Benny Morris, who published *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge University Press, 1987). Morris acknowledged that the archives were incomplete, but his study was the first detailed account of Zionist/Israeli policy and actions that contributed to the refugee problem in the period of independence. Morris also provided details on Israeli military actions during that period, notably rapes and murders.

As would be expected, Morris's book was greeted with outrage by the Israeli establishment. He was accused of being an anti-Zionist and of harming state security; and other academics, notably Ephraim Karsh, attacked his scholarship, claiming that he had been selective in utilizing his sources and plain wrong in

assessing Israeli statements, policies and actions. Morris and Karsh engaged in a war of words that, as usual in these cases, shed more heat than light on the problem. Several years after the original work was published, Morris published a revised version of the book, drawing on some additional sources and adding a new chapter on the idea of "transfer" in Zionist thinking. This revised edition did little to quiet the storm he had raised. (The excerpt above is from the revised edition.)

Over the next twenty-five years, additional scholarly work added to the debate by creating a more nuanced narrative of mixed responsibility, that is, a combination of the fog of war, Israeli proactive measures, decisions by Arab leaders to advise people to leave their homes, fear, and confusion, which all contributed to the Palestinian refugee problem. Once Palestinians had left their homes, politics, obstinacy, poor leadership, and diplomatic stalemate condemned the refugees to seventy years of statelessness.

More than twenty years of negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians failed to advance this issue very much. The 1991 Madrid Peace Conference paved the way for multilateral talks on the refugee issue, but no breakthroughs occurred. The refugee problem contributed to the failure of the Camp David II Summit in 2000, and it played a role in torpedoing every other effort to resolve the underlying dispute.

Recently, two factors have come into play to raise the public's consciousness about this issue. First, Benny Morris stunned the academic and political communities by revealing that, his own scholarship notwithstanding, he believed Israel had been justified in expelling the Palestinians during the war of independence: in his own words, "There are cases in which the overall, final good justifies harsh and cruel acts that are committed in the course of history."[1] Without the expulsions, Morris rued, the State of Israel would not have come into being.

Morris did not stop there, but argued further that Israel should have expelled all the Palestinians. Expressing the view that those Arabs who remained in Israel and became Israeli citizens were "a potential fifth column," Morris said: "If [Ben Gurion] was already engaged in expulsion, maybe he should have done a complete job. ... The non-completion of the transfer was a mistake."

And then along came Ari Shavit, at the time one of Israel's most respected journalists, who published "Lydda, 1948" in the *New Yorker* on October 21, 2013, a chapter from what was to become a popular book about the promise

1 Benny Morris, "Survival of the Fittest (Cont.)," *Haaretz*, January 8, 2004.

and challenges of contemporary Israel. Shavit, clearly conflicted in writing about events and Israeli actions that he knows were wrong, chronicles the ethnic cleansing of the Arab town of Lydda during the 1948 fighting. It was, he shows, a conscious act undertaken by Israeli commanders—notably among them future prime minister Yitzhak Rabin—who understood what their political leaders—notably David Ben Gurion—wanted done. In something of an echo of Morris, Shavit wrote: "From the very beginning, there was a substantial contradiction between Zionism and Lydda. If Zionism was to exist, Lydda could not exist."

For those, like me, who have been immersed in the search for peace for many decades, it has always seemed possible to bridge differences and thus avoid the stark choices that morality versus politics sometimes asks us to make. In the case of the Palestinian refugee issue, it was thought possible to preserve the Palestinians' "right of return" by offering them automatic citizenship and the right to settle in the Palestinian state that would one day be established. In this way, the refugees would satisfy their right to live in Palestine without asserting that right in the State of Israel. Under terms of a negotiated agreement, the international community would offer generous terms of financial compensation, both to those who chose to move to Palestine as well as those who decided to live elsewhere. Refugee-receiving countries would open their doors to a certain number of Palestinians. And language would be found to deal with the clash of narratives, so as to provide the refugees with some sense that their long wait for a resolution of their status was not for nothing, while exonerating Israel from any suggestion that the state was born in sin.

As the search for peace progressed over the years, there were some voices within each community ready to venture into these areas of compromise. In December 2000, President Bill Clinton offered "parameters" for negotiations that sought to narrow differences and provide a pathway for resolving outstanding problems. In those parameters, Clinton addressed all of the issues, starting his analysis with a striking declaration: "I believe that Israel is prepared to acknowledge the moral and material suffering caused to the Palestinian people as a result of the 1948 war and the need to assist the international community in addressing the problem." After offering American and international assistance to resolve the problem, Clinton addressed the core issue, the Palestinian claim of a "right of return":

> I know the history of the issue and how hard it will be for the Palestinian leadership to appear to be abandoning this principle. The Israeli side could

> not accept any reference to a right of return that would imply a right to immigrate to Israel in defiance of Israel's sovereign policies and admission or that would threaten the Jewish character of the state. Any solution must address both needs.

Keeping his focus on the goal of a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Clinton argued that "the guiding principle should be that the Palestinian state would be the focal point for Palestinians who choose to return to the area without ruling out that Israel will accept some of these refugees. I believe that we need to adopt a formulation on the right of return that will make clear that there is no specific right of return to Israel itself but that does not negate the aspiration of the Palestinian people to return to the area." Clinton went on to propose multiple options for solving the problem, offering refugees a menu of choices where they could settle.

Neither side accepted the parameters, and Clinton withdrew them. However, right after Clinton left the presidency, the Israelis and Palestinians restarted negotiations in Taba, Egypt, and according to the European Union observer at the talks, they engaged in a substantive discussion of the refugee problem, in which they exchanged papers and ideas for the first time. The Taba talks ended without success, however, and the peace process went into hibernation until the 2008 talks between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. At that time, Olmert made a stunning offer to the Palestinians.

According to a report by Bernard Avishai in the *New York Times*, Olmert offered to accept into Israel 1,000 Palestinians a year for five years, and that the process of repatriation would be in the spirit of the Arab League peace plan of 2002, the first time an Israeli leader was prepared to accord some importance to that Arab plan. Olmert also offered wording that would address the Palestinian narrative of suffering. In return for these gestures, Olmert expected written confirmation that the agreement would represent the end of all claims and the end of conflict. Abbas reportedly demanded a much larger number of returnees to Israel, but in general did not respond to Olmert's overall peace initiative.

Since 2008, there have been no formal or official talks between Israel and the Palestinians on the refugee issue, and only occasional contacts at all on the peace process, including several efforts undertaken during the Obama administration. Meanwhile, think tanks and academics continue to develop formulas to try to bridge differences and offer tools for policy makers to try to fix this problem.

These diplomatic activities, however interesting and in some cases promising, have not addressed the underlying moral and ethical issues in relation to political imperatives. The selections from Morris and Shavit expose some of the thinking and arguments that Israelis grapple with when considering the Palestinian refugee issue. Palestinian writers have addressed the refugee question in detail, but their approach has been focused on advocacy, to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Palestinian position, without much self-reflection. The divergent Israeli views that follow, therefore, will reflect anguish and anger, offering a glimpse into what is arguably the most contentious issue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.