



THE JUNE 1967 WAR AND THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEE PROBLEM

TOM SEGEV

This article, excerpted from a chapter of a new book on the 1967 war, focuses on the debates within Israel, especially within the government, regarding the fate of the Palestinian refugees (particularly in Gaza) who came under Israeli control in the wake of the war. The article explores Israeli government and military involvement, including that of the prime minister's office, in soliciting and crafting a number of plans to bring about the out-migration of Palestinians from Gaza.

SINCE THE BEGINNING of the Zionist movement, the hope of moving the Arabs of Palestine out of the country had been a constant. During British rule, Zionist leaders looked into various ways of paying them to move to distance provinces.¹ Certainly, the flight and expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Arabs during the 1948 war and its aftermath—a “wholesale evacuation,” which Moshe Sharett described as “more wonderful than the creation of the Jewish state”²—went some way toward realizing this hope. There were diplomatic considerations, however. In 1949, Israel offered to readmit 100,000 refugees as part of a peace settlement, but the plan failed and Israel rescinded the offer. The UN demanded that Israel give the refugees a choice of returning to their homes or receiving compensation, but David Ben-Gurion objected. “Everyone will want to come home and they will destroy us,” he said in 1961. This was the fear that dictated Israel’s position until the Six-Day War. “We have nothing to give and nothing to concede,” Prime Minister Levi Eshkol told Jean-Paul Sartre on the eve of the war.³ At the same time, Israel had been insisting that the UN was inflating the number of refugees in order to expand its budgets and activity, while the Arab states were said to be preventing the refugees from settling and perpetuating their suffering in order to harass Israel.⁴ Efforts to convey these messages had preoccupied the Foreign Ministry for years.

Meanwhile, the mass departure of Arabs during the 1948 war had not put an end to schemes for resettling those who remained. Israel made several attempts

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to encourage Israeli Arabs to emigrate to Latin America and elsewhere.⁵ When the Gaza Strip was occupied during the Sinai campaign, Eshkol, then minister of finance, allocated a half million dollars to finance the emigration of two hundred families of Palestinian refugees from Gaza, as well as a number of Israeli Arabs, mostly well-off Christians. The project was coordinated by Ezra Danin, one of Zionism's first secret agents.⁶

In 1962, the same Danin came up with an idea known as Operation Worker. The purpose was to encourage Palestinian refugees to emigrate to West Germany, where there was a new demand for foreign labor. Roughly eighteen months before the Six-Day War, Israel tried to orchestrate an agreement between Germany and Jordan that would encourage Palestinian refugees to migrate from Jordan to Germany through the German trade unions. Ruth Wolf, the Israeli Foreign Ministry official involved in the project, declared, "Perhaps it is necessary to hint to the Germans that they bear a special 'guilt' for the establishment of Israel, because of the Holocaust. Here they have a chance to help resettle refugees whose problem resulted from the creation of the State of Israel."⁷

THE RETURN OF THE REFUGEE PROBLEM

But it was not until the Six-Day War that Israel was once again confronted with the Palestinian refugee problem. Ben-Gurion had sensed that this would be the case, because four days before the war he had copied in his diary some figures from a nineteen-year-old newspaper article that claimed the estimated number of Palestinian refugees was vastly exaggerated, and that the most thorough probe would find no more than 300,000. Ben-Gurion clearly thought that this was information he should keep, even though he surely knew that the true number was at least twice that.⁸

Most Israelis knew little of the refugees' plight. Some saw them after the occupation of the Gaza Strip in the Sinai Campaign, but in the following decade there was little talk of the problem. When Israel entered the territories in the Six-Day War, many people were stunned at what they found, and realized that a solution had to be reached quickly.⁹ "We have a moral obligation," wrote Amos Elon in *Ha'Aretz* a week after the war, "because the road to Israel's independence was paved on the backs of these people, and they paid, with their bodies, their property, and their future, for the pogroms in the Ukraine and the Nazi gas chambers."¹⁰ These were extraordinary words: until then the received view was that Israel had not expelled the refugees, and in many cases had even urged them to stay, and was therefore not responsible for their fate. Ben-Gurion himself continued to promote this line, arguing in December 1967 that in 1948 "All the refugees left following their leaders' incitement during the British Mandate era and not after Israel was established."¹¹ This was untrue: most of the inhabitants of Lydda and Ramla had been expelled approximately two months after Israel's declaration of independence.¹² Additional refugees

were deported even later, from the Galilee, the Ashqelon area, and elsewhere. Subsequently it was established that roughly half the refugees left their homes and fled out of fear of the war, and half were forcibly deported.¹³

Following the war, some ministry officials were demanding an immediate solution to the refugee problem by means of a quick, comprehensive, unilateral operation, regardless of what was to happen with the territories. "We can start working immediately," wrote one, noting that such a step would strengthen Israel's "moral right" to hold on to the West Bank. Israel's ambassador to Canada, Gershon Avner, wrote from Ottawa to ask why the government was not setting up at least one factory for refugees and providing affordable housing nearby. He emphasized the propaganda value of such a step, and suggested allocating funds from the Foreign Ministry's publicity budget. A senior ministry official proposed immediately setting up two agricultural settlements. Avraham Harman, Israel's ambassador to the United States, sent Jerusalem similar proposals from Jewish and other organizations.¹⁴ Several Jewish public figures as well as international organizations offered to raise funds for the relief of the refugees, among them Lord Rothschild and the World Bank. Eshkol instructed Ya'akov Herzog, director general of the prime minister's office, to coordinate the various parties. Israel's ambassador to Washington reported to the prime minister that the United States expected Israel to initiate a program to resettle the refugees. He tried to convince Eshkol to agree, but Eshkol responded, "Maybe for once we can hear something from you about Jewish refugees instead of Arab refugees?"¹⁵ Like most Israelis, Eshkol found it difficult to acknowledge that Israel bore even partial responsibility for creating the refugee problem. The almost existential need to believe that Zionism had caused no injustice was deep-seated.

VACILLATION AND INDECISION

Prime Minister Eshkol had been haunted by vacillation and indecision over the country's future. He had no idea what should be done and practically no one to consult with. He wanted to get rid of the refugees but did not know how; he was not even considering the hundreds of thousands of "new refugees," but only those of the 1948 refugees who were still living in camps, primarily in Gaza.

Nor did a consensus emerge from the discussions of the refugee problem at a cabinet meeting a few days after the war. The ministers all had their own solutions. Interior Minister Haim Moshe Shapira proposed an astonishing plan whereby Israel would take in 200,000 refugees. Though he estimated that this would raise the number of Israeli Arabs to over a half million, some 20 percent of the population, he suggested that the government could maintain the Jewish majority by encouraging emigration, "doing something" about the birthrate, and making sure traffic fatalities dropped. Yigal Allon, the minister of labor, suggested settling the Gaza refugees in al-'Arish, in the northern Sinai, and on

the West Bank. Menachem Begin, minister without portfolio, supported the al-'Arish settlement idea, but also thought the refugees should be rehabilitated as their situation was a huge moral and human problem. The minister of development, Mordechai Bentov, suggested moving them from Gaza to the West Bank (Eshkol, too, spoke in favor of this solution), noting that instead of setting up new Jewish settlements in the West Bank, it would be better to resettle the Gaza refugees in Gaza. Minister of Police Moshe Sasson, declaring that the refugees were "the root of the conflict," proposed founding an independent state for the Palestinians or granting them an autonomous region. Defense Minister Moshe Dayan maintained the opposite view: UNRWA was handling the refugees and there was no reason to absolve it of that task.

Conversely, Minister of Industry and Commerce Ze'ev Sherf believed that Israel should begin quiet negotiations with foreign countries, with the aim of settling the refugees "overseas." This was also the hope of Finance Minister Pinhas Sapir, who described the refugee situation as explosive; Eshkol also favored the overseas solution. "There has been a population exchange," he said, as Israel had often argued. "We got population from Iraq; we got a hundred thousand Jews. They'll get a hundred thousand Arabs. It's the same language, the same standard of living, there's water and there's land."¹⁶ Eshkol admitted that the Iraqis might not accept the plan, but he thought the idea was "pure justice." When Minister Shapira objected that "There is no reason to pull out Arabs who were born here and move them to Iraq," Begin intervened: "In Greece they took out Turks who were born there and that was as part of an agreement." Eshkol quickly agreed, adding that he had himself had witnessed the resettlement. This had occurred some four decades earlier, in 1926, when Eshkol (then named Shkolnik) had traveled to Greece to learn about the resettlement of 600,000 Greek refugees from Asia Minor. It was "an enormous and interesting project," he wrote at the time, and he assumed it could be instructive in the context of Jewish settlement in Palestine.¹⁷ According to Eshkol, one could not call such a population transfer unjust, and the same applied to the "new refugees" living in Jordan: "First they lived here, now they live in Jordan." A few weeks later, Allon also suggested "encouraging" the refugees to emigrate, but warned his colleagues: "I am not suggesting that we publicly adopt the emigration solution for the Arabs, because it sounds somewhat unpleasant, especially for Jews and Zionists."

Everything came down to the foundations of Zionist ideology. "After all, we did not come in here as an underground movement," said Eshkol. "We declared that Palestine was ours by right." Minister of Health Barzilai objected: "But they are residents of Palestine." The prime minister stood his ground: "All the Jews of the world are residents of Israel who were uprooted and expelled, and then found a lifeline in other places." A few ministers tried to argue, but Eshkol silenced them.¹⁸

The proposed resolution submitted to the cabinet stated that Israel would "demand" of the Arab states that they take in the refugees. To ensure unanimity, they eventually agreed on broader wording: "The establishment of peace in the

Middle East, and the cooperation thereby engendered, will open the door to an international and regional settlement to resolve the refugee problem.”¹⁹

“A VERY DANGEROUS ILLUSION”

On the afternoon of 30 November, Eshkol summoned Yosef Weitz to a meeting at the prime minister’s office. By that time, his desk was piled high with plans and proposals to solve the refugee problem,²⁰ but Weitz was eminently suited to provide advice, having been director of the Jewish National Fund’s Land Settlement Department and an active promoter of transfer schemes since the mid-1930s. Eshkol led Weitz to a large map on the wall and asked, “Where should the new West Bank border be?” A UN-appointed negotiator was arriving soon and they had to decide what to tell him. A few weeks earlier, Weitz had published an article in *Davar* in which he suggested solving the refugee problem by “transferring” them from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank. He suggested giving the West Bank back to Jordan, with certain amendments to the border. “How do we do that?” asked Eshkol. Weitz promised to draw up plans and the prime minister instructed that he be sent adequate maps. Weitz’s proposal to settle the refugees in the West Bank was reinforced by a plan Eshkol had received from a small group of academics led by the economist Michael Bruno, which provided for the settlement of some 250,000 Gaza refugees in the West Bank over ten years at an estimated average annual cost, including housing, job creation, roads, schools, and hospitals, of not more than 200 million liras, or \$50 million.²¹

On 6 December Eshkol convened a lengthy consultation with two professors, Roberto Bachi, the director of the Central Bureau of Statistics, and Aryeh Dvoretzky, a professor of mathematics at the Hebrew University, who had also been trying to convince him that the Gaza refugees should be moved to the West Bank. The Italian-born Bachi was involved in efforts to raise the birthrate among Jews and reduce it among Israeli Arabs.²² Dvoretzky was among the scientists who made their skills available to the security establishment; in 1960, he was appointed head of Rafael, the weapons development authority.

The three did not talk much about the human plight of the refugees, whom they viewed as a problem for Israel. At no point in the conversation did they raise the possibility of absorbing the refugees within Israel or leaving them in Gaza. They began their meeting by studying a map. Bachi gave Eshkol alarming information: a survey had shown that infant mortality in Gaza might decrease. “If we continue to be as compassionate as we are now,” he said, infant mortality in the territories might even come to rival that of Israeli Arabs. “This is a shocking situation,” he observed. Seeking reassurance, Eshkol asked whether Westernization might lead Arab girls to have fewer babies. Bachi said yes, but that would take at least fifteen years, “unless we are able to assert more control over the Palestinian family unit.” He told the prime minister that more than half of the territories’ inhabitants were under the age of fifteen, which was another “frightening thing.” On the other hand, there was

reason to hope that those Gaza refugees who moved to the West Bank would go on to emigrate to Jordan or elsewhere. One-third of West Bank families sent one of their children overseas, Bachi explained. Like the Israelis who left the country for good, many Palestinians believed they would return but ended up staying abroad. Bachi and Dvoretzky asked the prime minister for direction.

“Now I’m going to show my cards,” said Eshkol. “First, I don’t know what I want. Second, I would like to do something.” It would be difficult to find any statement that better expressed Eshkol’s position on almost everything at any given time. He was not certain whether it was prudent to initiate action for the benefit of the refugees, he said; perhaps it would be better to wait for other countries or large organizations to do so. Or perhaps they should wait until there was a peace treaty. Perhaps there would be a war. Perhaps they should start dismantling one refugee camp on the West Bank, the smallest one, and see how its inhabitants fared. “Regarding the Arabs of Gaza, I would like to hope that they will leave Israel,” Eshkol said, as if Gaza were a part of the state. Bachi asked how that could come to pass, and Eshkol replied, “I don’t know. I’m looking for people who can find the solution.”

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Bachi suggested that Eshkol not count on the Arabs of Gaza to emigrate voluntarily. Before the war, many of them had left for Egypt. Now they were stuck. On the other hand, Bachi noted that “You can’t expel them. You can only encourage emigration,” even while adding that “To assume that it will solve the problem—that is a very dangerous illusion.” To Eshkol’s clarification that he was interested only in the emigration of the camp residents, Bachi reminded him that this involved about 180,000 people, and they could not bring about the emigration of so large a number. “In my opinion,” Bachi insisted, “we should look for other ways.” Eshkol, ever the joker, could not resist: “There is one other way: another six-day war.”

The two professors then stepped up their efforts to persuade Eshkol that only the West Bank offered a solution. The refugees could be settled in the Jordan Valley, said Dvoretzky, but quickly added, “It’s very important that this fact not be disclosed to anyone, because if anyone knew that Israel could resettle twenty-five thousand families and is not doing so, there would be a huge outcry.” Dvoretzky proposed, therefore, that the Gaza refugees be moved into houses vacated by the “new refugees,” and explained to Eshkol why this was a good idea: the more Gaza refugees occupied the houses of people who had recently left the West Bank, the less chance there was that those people would return. “In addition, you are provoking internal strife among the Palestinians themselves.”

Like Michael Bruno and his colleagues, Bachi and Dvoretzky stressed that there was no real basis for the plan to settle the Gaza refugees in al-Arish. Besides, said Bachi, an al-Arish of refugees could create a “refugeestan” over there, whereas on the West Bank they would be diluted by the other residents.

"If we move even a hundred thousand, and pray that another hundred thousand emigrate, we've achieved a great thing," said the mathematician.

Eshkol was also opposed to the al-'Arish idea, but at the same time he found it difficult to accept that the right place for the Gaza refugees was in the West Bank. "What a mess," he commented. He looked at the map and said he did not know whether there would be another war, but he did know one thing: Gaza must remain under Israeli control. Bachi said this was "a serious matter," and asked whether the prime minister intended to incorporate the Gaza Arabs into Israel; here was another reason to move them to the West Bank. Eshkol said that the Ministry of Defense (he did not say "Dayan") did not think the West Bank would be turned over to Hussein. Bachi said that even so, the Gaza Strip should be emptied. "Let us assume for a moment that you move a hundred and fifty thousand to the West Bank. If the whole area ever goes back to Jordan, you've tossed the Arabs outside your borders. And that is advisable. If the area remains in our hands, then you'll have less trouble from those in the West Bank than in the Gaza Strip. Because in Gaza they're presented for all the world to see as refugees." Not necessarily, Eshkol replied: "If they stay in the Gaza Strip, we'll pressure them to move somewhere." Bachi again asked, "But why would they leave? It's a fantasy." Eshkol repeated his original idea: "I say to them: take a hundred thousand refugees from here to Iraq. Isn't that moral?" Then he argued with his guests over their data. What would the refugees eat on the West Bank? he wanted to know. The professors eventually gave up. Perhaps it was better to wait for the Iraqi government to take in the refugees, Bachi said, and Eshkol responded, honestly: "I don't know where I stand with this whole business."²³

The proposal to move the refugees to the West Bank ran into resistance from Begin, who had earmarked the area for Jewish settlement. Allon objected to the refugees being moved to the Jordan Valley, which he also intended for Jews. From time to time, the initiative to resettle the refugees served as a focal point for personal quarrels between the ministers, replete with leaks to the press, but it eventually melted away.²⁴ Dayan was opposed to resettling the refugees on the West Bank, insisting that they belonged with Hussein—i.e., with Jordan, not the West Bank. Then Dayan added, "I don't mind if they all emigrate." Eshkol attempted to bring this idea to fruition.²⁵

"I WANT THEM ALL TO GO, EVEN IF THEY GO TO THE MOON"

In early 1968, eight months after the war, a small unit of five people began operating in Gaza under the direction of an IDF major. Their job was to encourage the local population to leave. They worked through collaborators who went around the camps promising people money in return for their agreement to go. This was a joint operation of the military government, the Shabak, and the prime minister's advisor on Arab affairs. The Foreign Ministry also tried to promote refugee emigration, and the Ministry of Finance was asked to fund the operation. A new position was created in the prime minister's office to coordinate these efforts and Eshkol hired sixty-two-year-old Ada Sereni to fill it.

Sereni was to “see but not be seen,” according to Eshkol, who explained that “She has a special knack for underground work.”²⁶

Sereni had been a heroic figure in the Zionist enterprise. She had been born in Rome to a wealthy Sephardic family, the Ascarellis. She married Enzo Sereni, also from a Jewish aristocratic family, and the two had moved to Palestine. Enzo became an activist for the labor movement, traveling to Germany in the early 1930s as a delegate of a youth movement. The couple later went to New York, where they lived in a Zionist commune on Riverside Drive. Back in Palestine, Enzo dealt with issues of defense, security, and secret operations. He eventually joined a unit of paratroopers in the British army, set up to infiltrate enemy territory, and disappeared after having been parachuted into northern Italy. After the war, Sereni went to search for her husband through the ruins of Europe and found evidence that he had been murdered in the concentration camp at Dachau. Staying on in Europe, she worked for the Bricha organization, which helped illegal Jewish immigrants reach Palestine, and assisted efforts to purchase arms in preparation for the 1948 war. Ben-Gurion asked her to use her connections to acquire aircraft. Later she joined Nativ, the covert Israeli organization that helped Jews leave the USSR, which sent her to work in Italy.²⁷

Eshkol, in choosing Sereni for the new job in 1967, hoped her contacts in Italy might facilitate the relocation of a large number of refugees from Gaza to Libya, Italy's former colony. Her appointment lasted for six months. She believed that within two years, 40,000 families—almost a quarter of a million Palestinians—could be removed to Jordan. She assumed the refugees would agree to leave in return for one thousand liras per family, and so she cited a cost of 40 million liras, less than \$10 million.²⁸ At their first meeting, which was also attended by Meir Amit, head of the Mossad, and by Yosef Hermelin, head of the Shabak, Eshkol told her that “I want them all to go, even if they go to the moon.”²⁹ The operation reminded him of the emigration process from Jewish villages in Russia to America: “There were a few companies that dealt with transporting people, and they took the shirts off their backs,” he recounted. “They led them like sheep, but the Jews went.” But even Eshkol, motivated as he was, found it difficult to believe the campaign would succeed, so he was reluctant to finance it. Thousands of refugees left the Gaza Strip during those months with no encouragement from the military government, and Eshkol hoped this process would continue without any financial investment. He wanted to know all the details, and expressed concern upon learning that many of the people leaving were young men, while the young women were being left behind. “This is a big problem for us,” he said.

This was not the only idea discussed at the meeting. Eshkol's adviser on Arab affairs, Shmuel Toledano, reported happily that he had a thousand foreign passports that he was distributing to Gaza residents who wished to leave. Meir Amit commented sternly that fake passports could endanger all of Israel's covert operations. Toledano, insulted, assured him the passports were genuine. Later, it transpired that they had been bought from the interior minister of a South American country. Nevertheless, skepticism prevailed: a holder of one of these passports might be involved in a car accident, and the police would discover

that he didn't even speak the language. Or a different interior minister might come along and start asking questions. Eshkol was not enthusiastic either, but Toledano believed his passports could be used for Israeli Arabs as well. "Any Israeli-Arab citizen we can get rid of—that's very important. It turns out hardly any of these people are leaving the country."

After Sereni began her assignment, she and Eshkol met frequently. "What's the situation? Is there a chance? Is there any hope of anything?" he would ask. And sometimes, "How many Arabs have you driven out so far?"³⁰ Most of the time they talked about money. Eshkol agreed to increase the number of field agents from five to twenty. He authorized Sereni to send people to Australia and Brazil to look into emigration options there. Sereni and her contact in the army, Shlomo Gazit, told Eshkol about additional needs: the Jordanian officer in charge of refugee crossings at the Allenby Bridge was demanding kickbacks. They also had to bribe a man in Saudi Arabia. Eshkol agreed to allocate funds and authorized an operational budget of over five million liras. But he repeatedly warned Sereni not to give money to Arabs who left the country, because as soon as you gave money to one, the rest would want even more.³¹

Eshkol was right. At first Sereni wanted only five liras per refugee, to pay for travel from Gaza to the West Bank. Eshkol said he did not believe an Arab from Gaza could not come up with five liras for cab fare, but he consented. Sereni said they also had to give out flour and sugar and subsistence money to tide people over when they first arrived in Jordan. When it turned out that Jordan would not allow people to bring their belongings with them, Sereni said the refugees should be compensated for what they had to leave behind. She discussed sending people to South America and the United States, at a cost of \$1,000 per family. When she asked what to do about a man who had \$300 to get to America but needed three hundred liras more, Eshkol decreed: "First let the people go who have the means to go." On another occasion he said, "Perhaps we should have stolen their money on their way out of here, like they've always done to Jews around the world." Sereni said there were "enormous difficulties all around the globe." Australia, for example, was willing to take Israelis, but they wanted only Jews, not Arabs, and it was difficult to deal with the Australians because they wouldn't take bribes.

Gazit backed up Sereni's requests, but the prime minister said he had no money. When he balked at her request for a hundred million liras, she asked for fifty million. Every so often she went back to the original calculation: "You won't agree to finish off the Gaza Strip affair for forty million liras? That's a very reasonable price!" Eshkol replied, "If you make a contract with me that you'll remove forty thousand people for such and such a price—then maybe. But you can't commit yourself." He was afraid the refugees would end up in such harsh conditions that Israel would have to come to their aid. He also demanded that people getting money from Israel provide receipts, so he could prove how much had been spent.

In May 1968, Sereni reported to Eshkol that during the first three months of her work approximately 15,000 people had left Gaza. Gazit estimated some 50,000 had left the Gaza Strip since the war; some of them might have gone

to the West Bank. The Central Bureau of Statistics found that in the first six months of 1968, approximately 20,000 people emigrated from the Gaza Strip. The IDF counted how many people crossed the Jordan bridges, as did the UN and foreign embassies in both Israel and Jordan, but no one could provide an accurate figure. The numbers leaving Gaza and the West Bank ranged from 220,000 to 250,000.³²

It is difficult to estimate how many left as a result of Sereni and Gazit's efforts. Dayan's assistant, Zvi Zur, told Eshkol about six different studies of why people were leaving the Gaza Strip. Nine out of every ten emigrants were young men, almost half of them single. Eight out of ten were refugees. Seven out of ten went alone. Most left behind no property; most had relatives in Jordan. They said they were leaving because of unemployment and because they were no longer receiving the stipends that their relatives in Arab states used to send them. Some wanted to reunite with family members and some went to study.

THE "GLOBAL TRAVEL AGENCY"

Few Israelis knew of the transfer project. Everything was done secretly, as if there were something shameful. In the Gaza Strip, however, many people knew about the "emigration offices" set up by the military government in the camps. The U.S. embassy reported on the project, even specifying the code names of two of Gazit and Sereni's operatives, "Wolfie" and "Yehuda." The International Red Cross sent a teenage boy to Sereni's "travel agents" to find out what was on offer. The boy returned with a quote of 500 liras if he left with his mother and siblings. The father had already gone. Earlier, the American diplomats wrote, Wolfie and Yehuda met with the *mukhtars* and asked them for a list of separated families. Upon departing the country, the emigrants had to leave behind the identification cards they had received from the military government.³³ They also had to sign a form declaring, in Hebrew and Arabic, that they were leaving willingly and understood that they would not be able to return without a special permit. They signed with thumbprints; if they could, they added their names in writing. Men signed for their wives. The form was occasionally modified, as was the custom in the occupation bureaucracy.³⁴ Gazit told Eshkol that Dayan wanted to speed up the project: the Jordan bridges might be closed any day.

Hopes that the refugee problem might be solved by emigration to faraway countries were bolstered from an unexpected direction: the U.S. senator Edward Kennedy supported a plan to disperse 200,000 refugees from Gaza around the world. Between 25,000 and 50,000 of them were supposed to make their new homes in the United States. Another senator, Jacob Javits, initiated a plan to resettle the refugees, and the Israeli consul in New York reported that the Lutheran church had pledged assistance. There was also promising news from Australia.³⁵

Alongside Gazit and Sereni's "travel agents," the Foreign Ministry, apparently in coordination with the Mossad, did what it could to encourage refugees to emigrate to Brazil and elsewhere in South America. Within weeks after the

war, Israeli ambassadors in various foreign countries were asked to respond to a questionnaire about the prospects for immigration. In August 1967, Eshkol wrote to Abba Eban, his foreign minister, that conversations with the Brazilian ambassador in Israel had led him to conclude that there was a possibility of removing thousands to that country, “if not tens of thousands.” The Foreign Ministry reported to Gazit about the arrival of a Brazilian travel agent who specialized in immigrants.³⁶

Israeli diplomats in Washington tried to convince the administration to support the transfer policy. They also established contact with an international organization that worked with refugees and displaced persons, the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM). The purpose of ICEM, wrote Mordechai Kidron, the Israeli delegate to the UN, was not to absolve Israel of responsibility for the refugees’ plight. Rather, the organization, which was founded after World War II to help displaced persons in Europe, by the late 1960s could no longer justify its existence and needed emigrants “as a fish needs water.” Nor had the potential host countries suddenly developed a desire to help Israel. They needed skilled labor: Brazil wanted agricultural workers, Australia needed shepherds and urban laborers, Canada wanted foresters and construction workers. The Israelis suggested starting with a small group of about 150 refugees. When they reached their destination, they would be met by a Mossad representative who would take care of their initial needs. If the project was successful, news would spread by word of mouth and the number of emigrants would grow.

The Foreign Ministry seems to have been functioning during this time as a global travel agency. Discussions revolved around passports, visas, and airplane tickets. There was a proposal to exempt refugees leaving Gaza from the travel tax. The ministry inquired about airline deals, noting that the refugees from Gaza refused to fly El Al. Someone suggested chartering flights and another said the minister of the interior had to work faster: there was no justification for taking so long to issue the refugees’ transit papers.

An argument ensued among the officials. Some claimed that the test group proposed by ICEM was too small, and that they could go straight to mass

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emigration—1,500 or 2,000 families, between 5,000 and 10,000 people—in two years. On the other hand, ICEM was considered a pro-Zionist organization and had given Israel \$15 million to absorb immigrants in the past. And so they continued to fantasize about a future without Arabs and to work on ways of making it happen. One Foreign Ministry official, Shlomo Hillel, was so gung-ho about the project that he wanted to present the Arabs with a condition: no peace treaty until the refugees were gone.

As it turned out, most of the refugees did not leave Gaza in return for plane tickets. Mass deportations were more or less impossible, because diplomats and the world press were always watching. But there was a third way. A senior

official in the Foreign Ministry, Michael Comay, wrote to Ambassador Harman that the military governor of the Gaza Strip, Mordechai Gur, was pushing people to leave Gaza by eroding their standard of living; he said Gur himself had admitted to this. Not everyone in the military government favored this approach: Dayan believed that although a deterioration of life in the Gaza Strip might bring about the departure of refugees, it might also make things difficult for the military government and damage Israel's reputation.³⁷ In preparation for the new budget, it was decided that the standard of living in Gaza should be "reasonable" but only "close to that which existed before the occupation." What this meant, according to one document, was that new sources of income would not be created for refugees living in the camps. In that same period, unemployment in Gaza reached 16.6 percent. The government did, however, decide to attract refugees from Gaza to construction and agricultural jobs in the West Bank.³⁸

CROSSING BACK

From time to time horror stories spread about initiatives to deport the residents of the occupied territories, and on one occasion the Jordanian authorities refused to allow a few hundred refugees to cross from Israel into Jordan, claiming they had been brought there against their will. In December 1967, the British consulate in Jerusalem confirmed a London *Times* story about some 200 bedouin from the Nussayrat tribe who had been forced over the Jordan River. About six months after the war, a discussion in which Dayan took part was summarized: "There is authorization to continue the policy of imposing local curfews, searches, and arrests following every act of terrorism, as one means of encouraging departures."³⁹

But the more the war receded into a distant memory, the fewer claims there were of forced deportations, and so it appeared that most Palestinians who left the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were not forced to go. They were not, however, allowed to return. Hundreds tried to slip back in, including women and children. But they were usually sent back and some were shot dead. In August, a few months after the war's end, some soldiers wrote to Eshkol that they were being asked to kill women and children crossing the Jordan. Eshkol sent the complaint to Dayan to investigate. Meanwhile, more rumors spread of women and children being wounded. On 13 September, Dayan gave Eshkol a report on the investigation. Minister of Justice Shapira demanded a more detailed report. In the afternoon, the issue was raised in the security cabinet. Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin told the ministers that under the rules of engagement, soldiers were to open fire on people trying to cross the Jordan at night, unless they identified them as women or children. In daytime, the soldiers were to shout a warning, and if the suspect did not stop, they were to fire shots in the air. In the three months since the war, Rabin said, 146 people had been killed trying to cross the Jordan, including two women and four children. Fourteen had been wounded. Just over a thousand had been

arrested and deported back to Jordan. Minister of Tourism Moshe Kol suggested installing lighting. Abba Eban proposed instructing the soldiers to shoot to wound, not to kill.

A report contained in the IDF archives adds details: every night the army positioned fifty ambush parties along the Jordan River. In the three months after the war, there were 95 encounters. Some of the detainees were Fatah members, but most were refugees trying to get back home. Two of those wounded were children. According to Israel Lior, Eshkol's military secretary, Eshkol demanded an end to the killings, but Rabin insisted that the rules of engagement remain unchanged. Dayan added, "It's not that bad." He assumed that by winter there would be fewer refugees trying to get back, and thus fewer casualties. Eshkol asked to be kept informed.⁴⁰

The plight of the refugees was a photogenic subject. Israeli ambassadors overseas wrote to Jerusalem that television broadcasts from the bridges and the tent camps set up by the UN on the eastern side of the river were damning. They reported on pictures of Israeli soldiers firing shots in the air to hurry the refugees over the bridges. Correspondents estimated that the new tent camps housed some 80,000 refugees from Gaza and the West Bank. Winter was coming, threatening to make conditions intolerable. "The most terrible impression is made by scenes of fathers with children in their arms, begging our guards to let them go back to their wives and children still on our side," wrote Israel's ambassador in Germany. He added, "We cannot stand up, here or in other countries, to the wave of protest, which we believe will also have political implications." He asked that Israel at least permit family reunifications. The ambassadors were right: the ugly images in the media led many governments, including the United States, to demand that Israel allow the refugees to return.⁴¹

Attempting to improve its image, the Israeli cabinet agreed to help not only the residents of Qalqilya, but also of two villages in the Hebron area. Eshkol gave orders to explain to British prime minister Harold Wilson that the reporters were misconstruing the scenes: the people they were photographing had left their homes willingly. As was the usual custom, he also cited the Holocaust. "No people," he told the vice president of the International Red Cross, "that, like ours, saw six million of its old and young butchered and burnt by the Nazis less than a generation ago, could be unresponsive to any humanitarian interest." He pledged one million liras to the UN to finance tent camps for the "new refugees."⁴²

It was not enough, and the ministers knew it. Abba Eban was shocked by scenes he saw on television during a visit to New York and told Eshkol to immediately arrange for a televised return of refugees. The ministers received a copy of an extremely blunt letter published in the *Times* of London by a member of Parliament, Margaret McKay.⁴³ In order to pacify the refugees and improve the ugly impression left on foreign visitors, a Foreign Ministry official suggested setting up toilets and benches in the shade, "so farewells will not have to be made in the middle of the road."⁴⁴ In July, the government gave in and grudgingly decided to allow a few thousand people to return for a limited

time. They were carefully selected, with the purpose of preventing the return of 1948 refugees. Conversely, the Foreign Ministry's Ruth Wolf believed that it was these refugees who should be preferred, because their economic situation was better thanks to financial support from the UN. "Furthermore, I recommend paying attention to the demographics—not only the number of children, but also the prospects for future births in terms of the women's age," she wrote. Her advice on deterring people who wanted to return: "Make sure there are suitable broadcasts on Kol Israel in Arabic about the insecurity of funds transfers from overseas, and the meticulous searches; also, do not conceal the current economic hardships." The Jordanians caused their own share of difficulties by refusing to allow refugees to sign up for their return on forms bearing the seal of the State of Israel. While the two countries quarreled, summer was drawing to an end. Eventually, Israel permitted a larger number of refugees to return.

This was Operation Refugee, and it was well publicized. The poet Haim Gouri was among those who went to the Allenby Bridge to watch the refugees return. "Women wearing black clothes walk by, carrying children who doze in the sun while flies buzz around them. A porter walks by with a huge pile of blankets and mattresses on his back. A woman with copper pots. A young man carrying a suitcase. And again the porters, dragging household goods and linens, and someone carrying a Singer sewing machine and a Primus stove, a handkerchief wrapped around pitas and onions. . . . An elderly hajji with a distant look seems to come from ancient pictures of the Palestine that died long ago."⁴⁵ The initial intent was to allow 20,000 people to return, but by the time the operation was over only 14,000 had managed to do so.⁴⁶

And so Israel missed the great opportunity offered by the victory of the Six-Day War to heal the malignant wound, as Ezer Weizman called it, left by the War of Independence. This was the "refugee blunder," Weizman argued many years later, "a painful and damaging blunder, perhaps no less so than the intelligence and military blunders committed prior to the Yom Kippur War."⁴⁷ It is hard to explain. In less than two decades, the 600,000 Jews living in Israel at its inception took in over a million new immigrants. They built hundreds of new communities, including cities, all within the confines of the Green Line. The refugees in Gaza and the West Bank could have been rehabilitated as well, and this would not have required allowing them to return to their homes in Israel or necessitated a decision on the future of the territories—whether withdrawal or annexation. The millionaires who offered to finance the rehabilitation were only waiting for the call. And it was an undertaking that could have offered something for everyone: national interest, humanitarian decency, Jewish solidarity, economic and social momentum, and international prestige; Zionist history would have seemed that much more noble.

But Eshkol, Dayan, and the other partners in the blunder believed there was no reason to hurry. Lacking vision, courage, and compassion, captivated by the hallucinations of victory, they never accepted Israel's role in the Palestinian tragedy. Or perhaps they simply did not have the courage to admit it; this was

probably the main inhibition. And perhaps they truly believed that one day they would succeed in getting rid of them.

NOTES

NB: Some of the notes below have been reduced due to space limitations. For full references, please refer to the notes for chapter 21 in *1967: Israel, the War, and the Year that Transformed the Middle East*.

1. Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of "Transfer" in Zionist Political Thought, 1882-1948* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992); Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1999), p. 328ff.
2. Shertok to Goldman, 14 June 1948, Yehoshua Freundlich, ed., *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel* [in Hebrew], vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Israel State Archive, 1981), p. 163.
3. Levontin to Eshkol, 12 June 1967, Israel State Archive [ISA], 5603/C-4; Katz to Eshkol, 15 June 1967, ISA, 6301/C-1; *Ha'Aretz*, 2 April 1967, p. 1 (Eshkol with Sartre).
4. Devorah Kaplan, *The Truth on the Arab Refugee Problem* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Meod, 1956).
5. Tom Segev, *1949: The First Israelis* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Domino, 1984), p. 68.
6. Danin to Weitz, 25 Nov. 1956, CZA, A246.
7. Operation Worker, ISA, 4095/HZ-16.
8. Ben-Gurion diary, 1 June 1967, Ben-Gurion Archives [BGA].
9. Shlomo Gazit, *The Palestinian Refugee Problem* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1994); Dan Bawly, *Dreams and Missed Opportunities, 1967-1973* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Carmel, 2002), pp. 104ff.
10. *Ha'Aretz*, 18 June 1967, p. 2.
11. Ben-Gurion Diary, 14 Dec. 1967, BGA.
12. In a government debate in 1961, Ben-Gurion initially claimed that the refugees "left," but then conceded that "they were pressured to leave." Discussion with Ben-Gurion, 23 June 1961, ISA, 7936/A-6.
13. Ben-Gurion diary, 1 June 1967; 14 Dec. 1967, BGA; discussion with Ben-Gurion, 23 June 1961, ISA, 7936/A-6; Elisha Efrat, *Geography of Occupation* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Carmel, 2002), p. 139.
14. Yehiel Ilzar to Director General, 18 June 1967, ISA, 4088/HZ-7; Avner to Ben-Horin, 8 Aug. 1967, ISA, 4088/HZ-7; Hillel to Eban, 6 Sept. 1967, ISA, 7931/A-2; Bernstein to Harman, 21 June 1967, ISA, 3979/HZ-9.
15. Herzog diary, 7 Sept. 1967, ISA, 4511/A-3.
16. Over a decade earlier, Ben-Gurion had suggested resettling refugees in Iraq at a government meeting. Shimon Peres thought they should be encouraged to emigrate to the Gulf oil states. Ben-Gurion in the government, 23 Dec. 1956, ISA minutes; *Ha'Aretz*, 9 Nov. 1967, p. 2 (Peres).
17. Eshkol received letters from ordinary citizens demanding that he empty the territories of their inhabitants and reminding him of the population exchange between Turkey and Greece. Knab to Eshkol, 11 June 1967, Eshkol to Knab, 27 June 1967, ISA, 6301/C-1; Yagar to Yaffe, 1 Aug. 1967, ISA, 6303/C-1.
18. Government meeting, 15 June 1967, Ya'akov Herzog estate, with the kind permission of his daughter; Allon in government meeting, 30 July 1967, minutes in possession of the author; Yemima Rosenthal, Arnon Lemfrom, and Hagai Tzoref, eds., *Levi Eshkol, the Third Prime Minister* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Israel State Archives, 2002), pp. 56, 581ff.
19. Government resolution, 19 June 1967, ISA, 7921/A-2; government meeting, 19 June 1967, Ya'akov Herzog estate, with the kind permission of his daughter.
20. Arnon to Sapir, 25 June 1967, ISA, 4601/CL-11; Gvati to Shilo, 30 June 1967, ISA, 6301/C-1; Eshkol to Bachi, 20 July 1967, review of the social problems in the occupied territories, 20 Sept. 1967, Yad Eshkol Archive [YEA], copy in possession of the author; Hillel to Eban, 8 Sept. 1967, ISA, 7921/A-2; Eban to Bentov, 4 Feb. 1968, YEA, copy in possession of the author; outline for policy on the refugee question, 8 Sept. 1967, ISA, 4092/HZ-5.

21. The project was also expected to create a huge economic upsurge in Israel and the West Bank, making the net cost far lower, and therefore not burden the country's economy. Weeks after Bruno's plan reached Eshkol, his office director wrote to Eban that it was being kept top secret because it demonstrated that there was no economic barrier to settling the refugees in the West Bank—a conclusion that could result in international pressure. See Development of the administrated territories, investigation of alternatives, ISA, 7921/A-3; Wiener to Eshkol, 28 Nov. 1967, ISA, 7921/A-3; Plan to Settle 50,000 Refugees in Al Arish Area, CZA, A186/66; Yosef Weitz, *My Diary* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Masada, 1973), vol. 6, pp. 191ff.; Yaffe to Eban, 18 Oct. 1967, ISA, 7921/A-3.

22. Bachi to Herzog, 18 June 1967, ISA, 6301/C-1.

23. Eshkol with Bachi and Dvoretzky, 6 Dec. 1967, ISA, 7921/A-3; Sasson to Eshkol, 19 July 1967, ISA, 7231/A-1; Eshkol with Dvoretzky, 20 March 1968, ISA, 7921/A-4; Rosenthal, et al., eds., *Levi Eshkol*, p. 582.

24. Allon to Eshkol, 10 Sept. 1967, ISA, 6301/C-14; Yigal Allon in interview with Reudor Manor, fourth meeting, p. 1, ISA, 5001/A-19; *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, 2 July 1967, p. 3; Shmuel Tamir in the Knesset, 6 Dec. 1967, Knesset Minutes [in Hebrew], vol. 50, p. 342; Herzog diary, 10 Sept. 1967, ISA, 4511/A-3.

25. Dayan in consultation with ministers, 3 July 1968, ISA, 7921/A-5; Dayan at ministerial committee on the West Bank, 24 Dec. 1967, ISA, 7921/A-3; Dayan in government meeting, 18 Feb. 1968, discussion brief in possession of the author; Dayan in government meeting, 17 Oct. 1967, Ya'akov Herzog estate, with the kind permission of his daughter; Herzog diary, 25 June 1967, ISA, 4511/A-3.

26. Eshkol with Sereni and others; Eshkol with Dvoretzky, 20 March 1968, ISA, 7921/A-4.

27. Ruth Bondi, *The Emissary: The Life and Death of Enzo Sereni* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1973); Ben-Gurion to Sereni, 29 Feb. 1948; Sereni to Ben-Gurion (1958), BGA, correspondence; Hagar Sereni-Confino in response to the author's questions.

28. Eshkol with Dvoretzky, 20 March 1967; Eshkol with Sereni, 27 March 1967, ISA, 7921/A-4.

29. Meeting on the Work of Ada Sereni, 19 Feb. 1967, ISA, 7921/A-4.

30. Eshkol with Sereni, Toledano et al., 19 Feb. 1968, ISA, 7921/A-4; Eshkol with heads of the Movement for Greater Israel, 12 Nov. 1967, ISA, 7920/A-7; Eshkol with Sereni, 27 March 1967, ISA, 7921/A-4 ("how many . . .?").

31. Prime Minister's Office Director to Prime Minister's Office Deputy Director, 2 April 1968, ISA, 7921/A-4.

32. Summary of the number of people crossing from the West Bank to the East Bank, 11 July 1967, Israel Defense Force Archives [IDFA], 66/117/70; Sweeny Report, 12 Sept. 1967, Public Record Office [PRO], Foreign and Commonwealth Office [FCO] 961/26/104107; Refugee Statistics, Symms to Department of State, 3 Jan. 1968, United States National Archives [USNA], Box 3049, REF ARAB, 1/1/68; Barbour to Rusk, 26 March 1968, USNA, Box 3056; Crawford to Moberly, 26 June 1968, PRO, FCO 17/217/104107.

33. U.S. Embassy in Lebanon to Department of State, and U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem to Department of State, 25 July 1968; U.S. Embassy in Israel to Department of State, 2 Aug. 1968, USNA, Box 3049, REF ARAB 1/1/68; Arich Brown, *Personal Seal: Moshe Dayan in the Six-Day War and Afterward* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Yedi'ot Aharonot, 1997), p. 154.

34. Greenberg to Gazit, 27 Oct. 1967, declaration draft, ISA, 4095/HZ-4.

35. Study on Emigrants Movement; August 1968, ISA, 7921/A-4; Kennedy to Sisco, 10 Aug. 1967, USNA, Box 3048, File REF ARAB 8/1/67; Arnon to Hillel, 14 Nov. 1967, ISA, 7921/A-4; Ben-Haim to Foreign Ministry, Jan. 1968, ISA, 4092/HZ-5; Battle to Rusk, 13 Feb. 1968, USNA, Box 3049.

36. Avner to Rivlin, 24 July 1967, ISA, 4088/HZ-6; Eshkol to Eban, 23 Aug. 1967, ISA, 7921/A-2; Hillel to Gazit, 3 Oct. 1967, ISA, 4096/HZ-4.

37. Hillel to Comey, 3 Dec. 1967, ISA, 4092/HZ-5; The Problems in the Gaza Strip, 21 Jan. 1968, IDFA, 128/2845/97; Brown, *Personal Seal*, pp. 166ff.

38. Hiram to Directors General, 11 Dec. 1967, ISA, 8122/CL-6; Government resolution, 2 July 1967, ISA, 23 July 1967, ISA, 10136/C-4; 5 Nov. 1967, ISA, 10136/C-5.

39. Lewen to Moberly, 14 Dec. 1967, PRO, FCO 17/212/104225; Lapp to Chase,

8 July 1967, Middle East Center Archive, St. Antony's College, Oxford University [MECA], Jerusalem and the East Mission, GB 165-0161, Box 73, File 2; Campbell to Rusk, 29 July 1968; Barbour to Rusk, 1 Aug. 1968, USNA, Box 3049, REF ARAB 1/1/68; The Problems in the Gaza Strip, 21 Jan. 1968, IDFA, 128/2845/97; Government Announcement, 29 June 1967, ISA, 6309/C-3; Yaffe to Levavi, 28 June 1967, ISA, 7921/A-2.

40. Herzog diary, 13 Sept. 1967, with the kind permission of his daughter; Infiltration from the East Bank to the West, IDFA, 70/117/70; Ross to Komei, 21 Aug. 1967, ISA, 3982/HZ-17; Eitan Haber, *Today War Will Break Out* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Idanim, 1987), pp. 291ff.

41. Ben-Natan to Foreign Ministry, 25 June 1967; Rafael to Foreign Ministry, 26 June 1967, ISA, 4089/HZ-2; Comey to Foreign Ministry, 23 June 1967; Harman to Foreign Ministry, 23 and 26 June 1967; Remez to Foreign Ministry, 26 June 1967, ISA, 4088/HZ-10; Foreign Ministry to Narkis, 18 June 1967, ISA, 4097/HZ-8; Sapir to Foreign Ministry, 27 June 1967, ISA, 7921/A-2; Tkoa to Israeli Embassy in the U.S., 1 Aug. 1967, ISA, 4088/HZ-6; Comey to Eban, 4 Aug. 1967, YEA, copy in possession of the author.

42. Government resolution, 10 Sept. 1967, ISA, 6304/C-9 (Qalqilya); Eshkol in the government, 8 Oct. 1967, ISA,

7921/A-6; Eshkol with Vice President of the Red Cross, 22 Oct. 1967, ISA, 6303/C-5; *Ha'Aretz*, 30 March 1967, p. 1; Hillel to Rafael, 16 Dec. 1967, ISA, 4088/HZ-3.

43. Eban to Eshkol, 12 July 1967, ISA, 7921/A-2; ISA, 6303/C-5.

44. Wolf to Comey, 15 Aug. 1967, ISA, 4088/HZ-7.

45. *Lamerhav*, 1 Sept. 1967, p. 2; *Ma'ariv*, 20 Aug. 1967, p. 3; Michael Shashar, *The Seventh-Day War: The Diary of the Military Government in Judea and Samaria (June–December 1967)* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1997), pp. 101, 148ff.

46. Government resolution, 2 July 1967; 6, 13, and 27 Aug. 1967; 5 and 10 Sept. 1967, with the kind permission of the Government Secretariat; Meeting summary, 4 July 1967, ISA, 6304/C-11; Tkoa to Dayan, 23 July 1967, ISA, 6301/C-1; Comey to Eshkol, 28 Dec. 1967, ISA, 4092/HZ-5; Tkoa to Raviv, 11 Aug. 1967, ISA, 4088/HZ-7; Hillel to Ganur (undated), ISA, 4088/HZ-5; Wolf to Comey, 15 Aug. 1967, ISA, 4088/HZ-7; Hughes to Rusk, 19 July 1967, USNA, Box 3048, File REF 7/1/67; Barbour to Department of State, 27 Nov. 1967, USNA, Box 3049, REF ARAB 10/1/67; Arab Refugees, 30 Nov. 1967, PRO, FCO 17/217/104107.

47. Ezer Weizman, *For You the Sky, for You the Land* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Ma'ariv, 1975), p. 297.