Land and Desire in Early Zionism
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We must raise up a generation that has no interests and no habits. Iron bars pure and simple. Supple—but iron. Metal from which all that is required for the national machine can be forged. A wheel is lacking?—I am a wheel. A nail, screw, a flywheel?—Take me! Must the soil be dug?—I am a digger. Is there a need to shoot, to be a soldier?—I am a soldier . . . . I have no face, no psychology, no emotions, I don’t even have a name: I—the pure concept of service, prepared for anything, I am not tied to anything; I know only one imperative: to build!

—Yosef Trumpeldor, 1916
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I conducted the research for this book and wrote most of it during the second Palestinian intifada, which began late in the year 2000. It was without a doubt one of the low points in relations between Jews and their neighbors, the Palestinians, in this tract of the Promised Land. F-16 fighter planes bombed densely populated civilian areas, and suicide bombers blew themselves up in crowded city streets. All distinctions between victims were completely blotted out—men, women, old people, children, babies. Terror on both sides.

Over the years, we—both Jews and Palestinians—have learned that the conflict between us is caused by politics, economics, ideology, religion, and history: waves of Jewish immigration to Palestine, the declaration of the establishment of the State of Israel, the expulsion of the Palestinians and the Nakba, the exploitation of cheap Arab labor by Jews, Zionism versus Arabism, and Judaism versus Islam. In myth, the conflict harks back to Abraham’s banishment of Hagar from his home. Over the years, writers, historians, and other intellectuals have offered explanations that combine these factors in one way or another.

As an Israeli historian who has been directly involved in this bloody conflict—I served as a soldier in the territories during the first intifada, principally in the Gaza Strip—and as an Israeli citizen who has lived through the second intifada, I find it difficult to accept that these factors are exhaustive, either alone or in combination. I have no doubt that they are all valid, important, and worthy of study. Each would be a necessary component of any endeavor to explain and understand the conflict.

However, the genesis of this book lies in an intuition that, in order to explain aerial bombing missions and exploding buses, we must look beyond politics, economics, ideology, history, and religion. There is something else here that has not yet been addressed by the scholarly literature. I call that something “desire.” By this I mean the desire of each party to the conflict for this land, desire that, in clashing, leads both parties to disaster. This book is devoted to the historical manifestations of Jewish desire for the Land of Israel—the territory that the Arabs and the rest of the world called Palestine but that for the Jews was simply “the Land.”

In the second intifada, we, Jews and Palestinians, reverted to primal warfare:
rocks, knives, vendettas, an eye for an eye, blood and soil, dismembered bodies. Israelis called it “the situation.” The term expressed the enormity of their helplessness. The endless cycle of bloodletting we Israeli Jews experienced during the second intifada produced an acute sense of an end that never ends. A kind of frozen time. Twenty killed in a bus bombing in Jerusalem, nine in a targeted killing in Gaza, thirteen Israeli Arabs shot dead by police, three Palestinians killed in Nablus in another targeted killing, over and over again. Anyone with dark skin and a coat was seen as a potential suicide bomber, every unidentified object as a ticking time bomb. The distinction between home and battlefield melted away. The entire country was the front line. It felt as if politics, economics, ideology, and especially history, in the sense of time that moves and changes, had all come to an end.

The second intifada brought the clash between the two desires for this land to an explosive point. The two could not exist side by side, simply because they are desires for the same place—the Land of Israel/Palestine. This war of desires recalls the words of Virgil in his Georgics: “Not all soil can absorb everything.” The soil of the Land of Israel has apparently absorbed all it can.

In this book I seek to go back to the constitutive moment of Zionist desire for the Land of Israel, to the moment when it received concrete form and content. In the standard account, Zionism began in the 1880s with the first wave of Jewish immigration motivated by modern nationalist consciousness, the First Aliya (literally, “ascent”; figuratively, wave of immigration). But, in my analysis, the first manifestation of real intention to return to the Land appears only at the beginning of the twentieth century, at the time of the Second Aliya. Many of the Jews who arrived in this wave of immigration were socialist-Zionist immigrants imbued with pioneering ideals: Jewish labor and settlement in the Land. Since that time, the Jewish community in Israel has changed politically, economically, socially, ideologically, and in many other ways. But the existential Zionist experience of being-in-the-Land-of-Israel retains its central place in Israeli experience. The pioneers, as I will show, were the first to equate the concept of being itself with the physical condition of being in Israel. Being-in-the-Land-of-Israel was, for them, not merely being situated in a specific place. Being-in-the-Land-of-Israel was, for them, to be.

This book is devoted to a portrayal of pioneering Zionist desire for the Land of Israel, not Palestinian-Arab desire. Like most Jews in Israel, I do not speak Arabic. As I will show, not knowing Arabic is itself a component of the Zionist desire for the Land of Israel, which seeks, and is able, to know the Land only via the Hebrew language. It may well be that a description of Palestinian desire for this land can be produced only by a Palestinian.

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