Introduction

The romantic Zionist ideal, to which Jewish liberals—and I was one, once—subscribed for so many decades, has been tarnished by the reality of modern Israel. The attacks on freedom of speech and human rights organizations in Israel, the land-grabbing settler movement, a growing strain of anti-Arab and anti-immigrant racism, extremist politics, and a powerful, intolerant religious right—this mixture has pushed liberal Zionism to the brink.

—ANTONY LERMAN, “The End of Liberal Zionism: Israel’s Move to the Right Challenges Diaspora Jews”

In December 2018, Israel’s prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, welcomed Italy’s interior minister and leader of the far-right nationalist League Party, Matteo Salvini, as a “great friend of Israel.” Netanyahu and other top Israeli politicians have courted other troubling political figures, such as former U.S. president Trump, Hungary’s prime minister Viktor Orbán, and other leaders of anti-immigrant and antisemitic parties in central and eastern Europe. At home, Israel pursues its own extremist nationalism. On the eve of the 2015 elections, Netanyahu warned that “Arab voters are coming out in droves.” The most dramatic display of this defiant nationalist stance is the Knesset’s enactment in 2018 of the Jewish nation-state law as a basic law—the equivalent of a constitutional amendment—that declares “the right to exercise national self-determination” in Israel as “unique to the Jewish people.” The Knesset’s action prompted the human rights group B’Tselem to conduct an overall analysis of Israel. It found Israel to be an “apartheid regime” that “uses laws, practices, and organized violence to cement the supremacy of one group over another.” The recently departed Israeli historian of fascism Zeev Sternhell offered a similarly bleak assessment:

We are at the height of an erosion process of the liberal values in which our society is based. Those who regard liberal values as a danger to the nation, the homeland and the Jewish state are the ones currently in
power. They are striving to delegitimize the left and anyone who does not hold the view that conquering the land and settling it through the use of force are the fundamental foundations of Zion.

Sternhell’s anguish reflects a common liberal Zionist perception that Israel’s intolerant nationalism of recent years marks a sharp departure from Zionism’s liberal foundation. Most liberal Zionist critics continue to take pride in Israel’s establishment and to support a Jewish nation-state. For them, Zionism’s moral decline took root only in the post-1967 era, particularly with the rise to power in the late 1970s of Israel’s hard-line Likud Party, which greatly expanded the state’s settlements and colonization of the occupied territories. Only then, so the argument goes, did Israel transition from being a genuine (if flawed) liberal democracy to an occupier of another people increasingly prone to illiberal impulses. Regrettably, add American liberal Zionist critics, the American Jewish establishment has enabled this descent through its continued defense of Israeli policies. Accordingly, liberal Zionists target Israel’s occupation as the root injustice to be extirpated. They call for a two-state resolution, whereby Israel retains an overwhelming Jewish majority while the new state of Palestine satisfies Palestinian self-determination aspirations. Under this solution, they hope that Israel will once again harmonize its Jewish and liberal democratic ideals.

Jewish anti-Zionists, by contrast, renounce the entire Zionist historical project as settler-colonial in which European Jewish settlers, backed by the dominant global powers, wrested control of Palestine and displaced the bulk of the indigenous population. They regard the post-1967 occupation as a continuation of settler colonialism. Rather than seek a transformed version, Jewish anti-Zionists, such as the U.S.-based Jewish Voice for Peace, “unequivocally oppose Zionism because it is counter to” the ideals of equality and freedom. Many also condemn Zionism’s moral degradation of the Jewish people. For example, the theologian Mark Ellis characterizes the prevailing nature of U.S. Judaism as a “Constantinian Judaism” devoted to defense of the Israeli state. The anti-Zionist path forward is a democratic single state and full implementation of the right to return for Palestinian refugees and their descendants.

This book identifies much of value in both the liberal Zionist and Jewish anti-Zionist perspectives but finds neither satisfying for diagnosing the evolution of the Zionist project, advancing an alternative vision of Jewish self-determination, or prescribing a program of reckoning and reconciliation. At heart, each is hobbled by the post-1948 constriction in Zionist discourse. Prior to Israel’s establishment, the spectrum of Zionist positions extended to those who supported Jewish self-determination but opposed a hegemonic Jewish state.
Subsequently, commitment to a Jewish nation-state and belief that Israel’s establishment outweighed the moral costs of the Nakba—the permanent displacement of most Palestinians—have become litmus tests. Thus, liberal Zionists rarely challenge the major decisions taken by Israel’s founders and often perform moral gymnastics to distinguish the Nakba from Israel’s post-1967 depredations. Similarly, they remain committed to retaining Israel’s identity as a Jewish state, stress the demographic separation of Jews and Arabs into two states, and oppose any large-scale return of descendants of Palestinian refugees to Israel. By taking these positions, liberal Zionists avoid coming to terms with the moral tensions between the values of a Jewish state and those of a liberal democratic one. Conversely, because of their opposition to a Jewish nation-state and repudiation of the Nakba, Jewish anti-Zionists typically deny any appealing values and institutions in Zionism, past or present. To avoid giving legitimacy to Zionism, most refrain from positing an alternative program of Jewish self-determination in the territory consisting of Israel-Palestine.

Encouragingly, two formerly conventional liberal Zionists, Peter Beinart and Omri Boehm, have recently come out in favor of a non-statist variant of Zionism. Both endorse a binational single state that encompasses autonomous cultural and political institutions for Jews and Arabs within a unified state. This binational arrangement, they argue, preserves what had prior to the late 1930s been the goal of the leading Zionist figures, including David Ben-Gurion: “A thriving Jewish community with the autonomy to run its own affairs.” By recovering and adapting the purportedly original intent of the Zionist founders, conclude Beinart and Boehm, a new and just vision can take shape.

Beinart and Boehm’s interjections are much welcome for decoupling Zionism from a hegemonic Jewish state. This book, too, advances a non-statist vision of Jewish self-determination to be realized in a binational political arrangement. Where we primarily differ is in our interpretation of Zionism’s foundations. As elaborated in subsequent chapters, even if Ben-Gurion and other Zionist leaders did not originally propose an avowedly Jewish nation-state, their end goal was Jewish domination of Palestine, including an overwhelming Jewish majority. Thus, Palestine’s Arabs were slated to be a drastically reduced minority who would enjoy collective rights once they conceded the inevitability of the Zionist project. I thus posit the need for a far-reaching reckoning of Zionism’s foundations. Only then will it be possible to assess what went wrong with the Zionist project and achieve a just reconciliation.

This book incorporates a non-statist vision of Jewish self-determination within a critical framework that scrutinizes the foundational shortcomings of the Zionist project and features a just and collaborative coexistence of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs. For guidance, I retrieve the ideas of the first sig-
Insignificant dissenting Zionist movement on the left. From the outset of the British Mandate, these dissenters welcomed the fostering of a revived Jewish community in Palestine but energetically opposed the separatist and hegemonic policies of the pre-state Zionist leadership. They implored the Zionist community to take concrete steps to bring about a just and collaborative coexistence. Because their leading intellectual mentor was Martin Buber, who articulated a “Hebrew humanism,” I identify this dissenting framework as Humanist Zionism. This book engages the Humanist Zionist vision with a range of post-1967 critical Jewish perspectives, as well as that of Edward Said, to provide an updated critical Jewish vision attuned to contemporary dynamics. Inspired by both Humanist Zionists and Jewish anti-Zionists, this book’s vision confronts the Zionist movement’s foundational sins and demands a full reckoning with the Palestinians. Unlike most anti-Zionists, however, I aim to recover the appealing social justice and spiritual dynamics that inspired many Jews to emigrate to Palestine in the pre-state years. Like liberal Zionism, this book’s vision welcomes Jewish attachment to Israel-Palestine, but it rejects hegemonic nationalism and accords Palestinians an equal claim to the same territory. Similar to Beinart and Boehm, I regard an updated binational program as the best path forward.

Since the turn of the century, which saw the outbreak of the second intifada and the onset of a virtually uninterrupted grim situation, there has been a marked renewal of interest in the pre-state dissenting Zionists. Jacqueline Rose explains the cause of the surge. One is “struck,” she observes, “with an overwhelming sense of a moment missed, of voices silenced. . . . Today we are all still suffering the loss of their critical, insightful vision.” This book enlists these silenced voices as a foundation for a contemporary dissenting Jewish perspective, which challenges the fundamental premises of Zionism and reconceives Jewish self-determination to require a just and interactive coexistence among Jews and Palestinians.

The Enduring Value of Humanist Zionism as Advanced by Martin Buber and Hannah Arendt

The dissenting Humanist Zionist movement emerged at the Twelfth Zionist Congress in 1921, shortly after the establishment of the Jewish Yishuv in British-Mandate Palestine. Its main institutional voices were Brit Shalom in the 1920s–1930s and Ihud in the 1940s. The Humanist Zionists looked to Palestine as a base for invigorating Jewish life globally, reviving Hebrew as a spoken language, and developing community institutions and practices informed by the best of Jewish and outside values and traditions. In contrast to the main-
stream Zionist movement, which preferred to negotiate with Great Britain and other outside powers, the Humanist Zionists were anti-imperialist and urged an accommodation with the indigenous Arabs. They opposed a hegemonic Jewish state because it would displace Palestinians and elevate realpolitik and state interests over Jewish renewal and social justice. Their alternative was a binational political arrangement, which featured autonomous development for each community, collective equality, and shared spaces of governance and community interactions.\(^{15}\)

Although never having a large following, the Humanist Zionists attracted much attention and exerted considerable influence by virtue of the attractiveness of their political program and the prominence of their members. They made up the only Zionist movement that prioritized outreach to the Palestinian Arabs, decried the leadership’s insensitivity to the impact of its policies on Palestinians, and outlined a program for just coexistence and extensive interaction rather than separate development.\(^{16}\) Their supporters included Gershom Scholem, the preeminent authority on Jewish mysticism; Henrietta Szold, the founder of the Hadassah Women’s Zionist Organization of America; and, from a distance, Albert Einstein. The two most resolute advocates were Judah Magnes and Martin Buber. Magnes was a charismatic rabbi, community leader, and social justice activist in the American Jewish community who moved to Palestine and became the first chancellor of Hebrew University.\(^{17}\) He maintained close connections with leading U.S. Jewish philanthropists and enjoyed easy access to U.S. and British diplomats. Buber was a renowned German scholar of Judaism whose range extended to comparative theology, philosophy, psychology, education, and political theory.\(^{18}\) To the frustration of David Ben-Gurion and the rest of the Zionist leadership, Ihud’s binational proposals attracted considerable international interest, including from the 1946 Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry task force. The latter praised Ihud and agreed that partitioning Palestine into separate states “would result in civil strife such as might threaten the peace of the world.”\(^{19}\)

Regrettably, the Humanist Zionist program lost out politically, and the Jewish nation-state of Israel was established with the UN’s approval. It may be tempting to follow Israeli historian Benny Morris’s lead and dismiss the pre-state dissenting Zionists as utopians with only modest support among Jews and very little from Palestinians.\(^{20}\) But such an attitude fixates on the fate of the pre-state binational proposals and misses the cogency and depth of the underlying Humanist Zionist vision. Whatever the political feasibility in the 1940s of the binational program, the Humanist Zionists were remarkably prescient on the enduring moral costs of forging a Jewish nation-state over the fervent objections of the indigenous Palestinians. A more judicious Benny Mor-
ris might have acknowledged that the UN’s approval in 1947 of partition was not a practical plan for attaining a peaceful resolution, much less a just one. Indeed, the partition resolution triggered war and the ensuing permanent displacement of the vast majority of the Palestinians. The Jewish people gained a state, but as Hannah Arendt later lamented, this “solution” “merely produced a new category of refugees, the Arabs.” Moreover, as also anticipated by the Humanist Zionists, the Jewish state became both militarist and committed to diminishing the Palestinian footprint, both of which have compromised liberal democratic principles and enabled perpetual conflict, regional isolation, and a dependence on outside powers.

To capture the heart of Humanist Zionism, I focus on its two most insightful thinkers, Martin Buber and Hannah Arendt. Buber was the movement’s leading intellectual voice and lived in Palestine/Israel from 1938 to his death in 1965. He articulated a vision of Hebrew humanism, grounded in a set of Jewish and universal ethics, which emphasized Jewish renewal, justice, and an interactive coexistence with Palestinians. He welcomed the movement of Jews to Palestine as fulfilling a covenant with God to settle in the land of ancient Israel in pursuit of Hebrew humanism. Importantly, Buber decried the priority that mainstream Zionists gave to a Jewish nation-state because it “regard[ed] Israel as a nation like unto other nations and recognize[d] no task for Israel save that of preserving and asserting itself.” He saw this fixation as undermining the desired end goal of Zionism.

Buber identified a just accommodation with the Palestinians as integral to Hebrew humanism. “A regenerated Jewish people in Palestine,” he affirmed, “has not only to aim at living peacefully together with the Arab people, but also at a comprehensive cooperation with it in opening and developing the country.” He appreciated the difficulties of this task and acknowledged that tension could not be avoided altogether. As the recent arrivals, the Jews were obligated to take the initiative by getting to know the Palestinians—their culture, religion, historical experiences, political goals, and, above all, attachment to the land—and adjust accordingly. Buber implored the Jewish community to distinguish between what was necessary for self-determination and rehabilitation and what amounted to a will to dominate. The latter, he warned, transformed manageable tension into a zero-sum political conflict. Throughout his life, Buber demanded that the Jewish community in pre-1948 Palestine and post-1948 Israel reckon with the harms it inflicted on the Palestinian community, including the Nakba. He offered a framework for redress and reconciliation based on equality, empathy, and mutual respect.

Unlike Buber, Arendt was only briefly active in Zionist politics—starting in the early 1940s and ending shortly after Israel’s establishment—and never
showed interest in moving to Palestine-Israel. Instead, she pioneered the role of the critical diaspora Jewish Zionist, who brought important new dimensions to Humanist Zionism. Her commentary on Zionism has attracted more academic and popular interest than those of all other Humanist Zionists, including Buber. Most feature her trenchant critiques of Zionism. Meanwhile, since writing *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in the early 1960s, Arendt has been a persona non grata for mainstream Zionists. Yet she never became anti-Zionist. She took pride in Palestine’s pre-state Yishuv for developing a new Jewish cultural center and socially just institutions, such as the kibbutzim. Arendt saw the potential of Zionism to advance Jewish emancipation and contribute to global struggles for a more egalitarian, democratic, and peaceful world. To fulfill this promise, Zionists would need to reject a nation-state and collaborate with Palestine’s Arabs on an alternative program.

Arendt’s greatest contributions to Humanist Zionism are summoning a sophisticated historical context for the European Jewish experience, assessing the dangers of statist nationalism and imperialism, articulating a federalist alternative to nation-states, and diagnosing root pathologies in mainstream Zionism. She linked the onset of Zionism to the evolution in Europe of nationalism, the nation-state system, imperialism, modern antisemitism, and internal political and social dynamics in Europe’s Jewish communities. Although Arendt credited Zionists for giving Jews agency, she diagnosed the prevailing wing as suffering from two underlying maladies. First, it subscribed to a belief in an eternal antisemitism unaffected by broader historical developments or the choices made by Jewish communities. Consequently, mainstream Zionists regarded all outsiders as suspect and adopted a persecution complex. What followed was the second malady of a “tribal” nationalism, which rejects collaboration with the outside world as futile given unrelenting antisemitism.

This book synthesizes the collective insights of Buber and Arendt into a composite Humanist Zionism and engages them with a range of post-1967 Jewish dissenters and with Edward Said to advance a transformed critical Jewish vision attuned to contemporary realities. On the one hand, this new vision sharply diagnoses mainstream Zionism’s foundational shortcomings, which continue to afflict both Israeli society and mainstream Zionist organizations in the United States and elsewhere. These shortcomings include a creed that assumes an eternal antisemitism and an insular nationalism perpetually suspicious of the outside. On the other hand, this book’s vision advances a distinct Jewish self-determination committed to cultural enrichment and emancipation, internationalism, and the fostering of new political, social, and economic channels for attaining genuine reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians.
Plan for the Book

The next chapter elaborates on the urgency of breaking from Zionism as currently understood and developing a Jewish-based critical perspective, which includes a transformed vision of Jewish self-determination oriented toward a just coexistence with Palestinians. It begins by reviewing the grim status of actually existing Zionism, as reflected in Israeli society and in mainstream American Jewish organizations. The chapter then assesses the recent efforts by Beinart and Boehm to confront the status quo by advancing a new Jewish critical framework aimed at rescuing liberal Zionism and bringing about a just resolution. Each, I argue, integrates a sharp critique of actually existing Zionism and the reigning peace orthodoxy with an innovative and compelling alternative set of ideas. Yet the chapter identifies a major shortcoming in that each embraces the supposed original ideals of Zionism. Relying on a recent study by Dmitry Shumsky of leading Zionist pioneers, Beinart and Boehm claim that their new anti-statist, binational Zionism revives Zionism’s foundational ideas prior to the late 1930s. Although this claim is rhetorically seductive, I show that they read too much into Shumsky’s findings and gloss over the decidedly hegemonic and anti-Palestinian dimensions of the prevailing Zionist project from its outset. The chapter argues, by contrast, that any worthwhile reconceptualization of Jewish self-determination needs to confront and repudiate the foundational program. Accordingly, I close by making the case for recovering the voices of the original anti-statist Zionist dissenters, the Humanist Zionists.

The next three chapters bring out the richness and continued value of the Humanist Zionist synthesis of Buber and Arendt in anchoring a comprehensive critical Jewish perspective. Chapter 2 features Buber’s evolving approach toward Zionism. It begins by situating his ideas within the broader challenge that Brit Shalom and later Ihud launched against the Zionist mainstream from the early 1920s to 1948. The chapter then reviews Buber’s efforts between 1949 and 1965 to adapt his vision to the new reality of a Jewish nation-state. I establish three enduring aspects to Buber’s Zionism. First, contrary to the charges leveled by some critics of romantic idealism and naivete, he consistently grounded his vision in a nuanced political assessment of what was attainable in the historical setting at hand. Second, Buber offered a compelling alternative Zionism. Finally, he provided an empirically informed guide for advancing Jewish-Palestinian reconciliation.

Chapter 3 turns to the iconoclastic outsider Hannah Arendt. It first identifies central themes from Arendt’s examination of the modern European Jewish experience, drawing from The Origins of Totalitarianism, whose prepara-
tion partially overlapped with her Zionist essays. I focus on her critique of the destructive forces unleashed by nationalism and imperialism, for which the Jewish question became central, and of the dysfunctions within Europe’s Jewish communities. The chapter next situates Arendt’s approach toward Zionism within the lessons she derived from the European experience. While she saw the potential of Zionism to inaugurate an emancipatory and globally engaged Jewish politics, she feared that the prevailing Zionist politics retained an insularity wedded to traditional great-power politics, which would bring disaster to Jews and Arabs. I then review how Arendt modified her Zionism following Israel’s establishment. She remained highly critical of Israel’s insular nationalism but accepted the new reality of Israel as a state closely attached to the Jewish people. Crucially, she continued to attach the long-term health of Israel and the Jewish people to a more just and cohesive global order rather than to a powerful Jewish state.

Chapter 4 follows up on the warnings of Arendt and other Humanist Zionists of the long-term costs of founding a Jewish state based on military conquest and ethnic predominance. It examines three pivotal historical periods. The first is Israel’s initial decade, in which it institutionalized a hegemonic Jewish nationalism and a hard-line stance toward Palestinians and its neighboring states. The second is the dozen years following the 1967 war, which saw the crystallization of Israel’s occupation, of a two-state global consensus—rejected by Israel—and of the U.S.-Israeli special relationship. The third is the decade from 1991 through 2001. It began with tantalizing prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace and ended in the second intifada and the harsh Israeli crackdown. Collectively, the chapter demonstrates the enduring cogency of Humanist Zionism in diagnosing what to expect of a state wedded to both insular nationalism and a belief in the eternal hostility of outsiders, especially its most immediate adversaries. In each era, Israeli leaders failed to take advantage of promising opportunities to either mitigate conflict with Palestinians and neighboring Arab states or minimize injustices inflicted on Palestinians living in both Israel and the occupied territories.

Chapter 5 engages Humanist Zionism with a range of post-1967 critical Jewish perspectives. These include the initial reflections from Noam Chomsky and Uri Avnery and more recent interventions from leading liberal Zionist and anti-Zionist Jewish dissenters. The chapter’s primary aim is to mine insights from contemporary critical approaches to develop a new critical Jewish vision anchored in the Humanist Zionist framework but free of its gaps and shortcomings and attuned to post-1967 developments.

Chapter 6 addresses a major shortcoming of Buber and Arendt. Both slighted or disparaged the experiences of Palestinians and Middle East-origin Jews,
the Mizrahim. Although Buber and, to a lesser extent, Arendt sought much greater outreach and sensitivity to Palestinians, the partnership they advanced came with a whiff of condescension and paternalism. Neither identified affirmative contributions of Palestinians other than Buber’s praise for their connections to the land. All the more disappointing was their neglect of the experiences of the Jews who had lived for centuries in majority-Arab communities across the greater Middle East. To redress the Eurocentrism of Buber and Arendt, I summon the respective pioneers of critical Palestinian and critical Mizrahi scholarship, Edward Said and Ella Shohat. Like the Humanist Zionists, Said and Shohat have decried conventional nationalism, articulated a non-nationalist self-determination, challenged internal orthodoxies, and advocated for a binational shared future. Yet each brings in a very different orientation by emphasizing the harms inflicted on Zionism’s victims and the ways this subjugation has shaped the collective perceptions and identities of Jews and Palestinians. Reading Said and Shohat together with Buber and Arendt allows me to further refine a transformed critical Jewish vision and develop a program of reconciliation attentive to the intersecting experiences of European-origin Jews, Palestinians, and Mizrahim.

The final chapter addresses how to advance the book’s long-term goals. It features a close engagement of the two most polarizing issues among the Jewish left as well as Palestinians and the broader left. One is whether it is necessary to categorically renounce Zionism in order to develop a just vision of coexistence. The second is whether, as demanded not only by anti-Zionists but also by a new crop of reconstructed liberal Zionists such as Peter Beinart and Ian Lustick, to abandon all two-state advocacy. On the first issue, I call for a middle ground that neither renounces Zionism nor retains it as part of a shorthand label for this book’s vision. On the second issue, I propose a creative and pragmatic advocacy that links the global consensus version of a two-state resolution to a more ambitious and comprehensive binational arrangement for all of Israel-Palestine. Such a program would repudiate the emaciated two-state version that emerged in U.S.-led talks following the 1993 Oslo accord and update the antiestablishment two-state program introduced by Jewish peace activists in the late 1960s and 1970s, which aimed to resist Israel’s occupation and subjugation of Palestinian, strengthen Jewish dissent, and foster Jewish-Palestinian solidarity. The end goal is not detached nation-states but an egalitarian and integrated binational polity across Israel-Palestine.