



ASK HERZL

The War of Independence 1947-1948



The War of Independence was the longest, bloodiest, and most complicated war in Israel's history. It was a tragic war that saw tremendous loss of life on both sides. Out of the 600,000 Israeli Jews living in the land at the time, 6,000 were killed and 12,000 were seriously injured. That means that 3 out every 100 Jews in the country were either killed or injured. The war was complicated because it saw many different stages with many triumphs and defeats on both sides. Ultimately though it heralded the creation of a Jewish State for the Jewish people in her ancestral homeland for the first time in thousands of years and amazingly managed to survive, even after an invasion by five Arab armies.

So, what happened in this war? What were the different up and downs? What was the effect of this war for both Jews and Arabs and ultimately how as educators to go about teaching such a complicated conflict?

Part 1: The Cause of the War

Come mid-1947 the British Mandate for Palestine had run its course. The British had realised that the management of both the Jewish and Arab populations of Palestine rendered the continuation of the Mandate detrimental to British interests. They therefore passed the question of the future of Palestine to the newly formed United Nations. The United Nations set up a special committee, the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) to investigate what shall be the fate of the country. The committee came to Palestine in the summer of 1947 and witnessed two dramatic events: the arrival of



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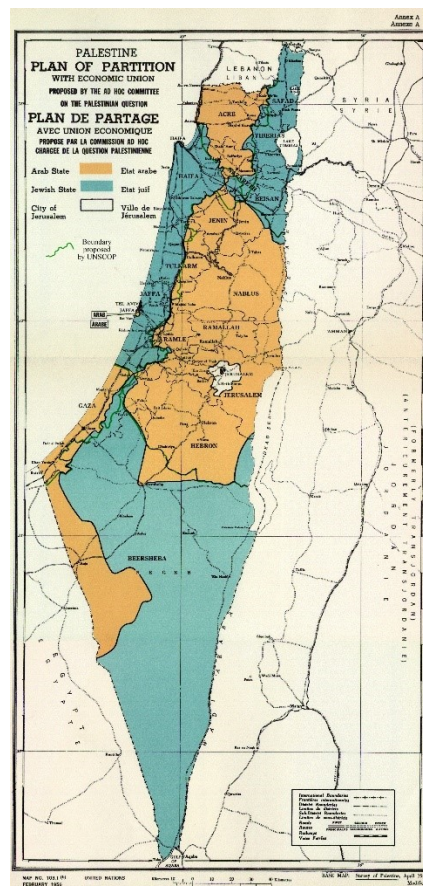
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the Exodus ship in Haifa and the Sargent's Affair concerning the execution of Irgun soldiers. Their conclusion from their visit was twofold. Firstly, they concluded that the British had lost their legitimacy and must withdraw from the country. Secondly, they concluded that the country must be divided between the two populations of the land and therefore create a Jewish and Arab state in the territory of mandatory Palestine, with Jerusalem and the surrounding area being declared an international city to be administrated by the UN.

Even though the Jewish State would be mostly desert and without Jerusalem as her capital, the Zionist leadership and community welcomed the plan. At the very least the Jewish people would have their own independent state in their ancestral homeland. There would no longer be Jewish refugees with nowhere to call home. The Arab population however, on the whole rejected the plan and therefore campaigned strongly that the UN Partition Plan would be rejected by General Assembly vote that was set for November 29th, 1947. The vote, however, resulted with the approval of the plan with 33 countries voting in favor, 13 against, and 10 abstentions.



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Video of UN Vote:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xzxod60_Vbs

The Jews of Palestine responded to the news of the vote with great joy and celebrations. Amos Oz in his childhood memoir *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (Chatto & Windus, 2004) describes the scenes in Jerusalem:

“Then there was dancing and weeping in Amos Street, in the whole of Kerem Avraham and in all the Jewish neighbourhoods; flags appeared, and slogans written on strips of cloth, car horns blared, and ‘Raise the banner high to Zion’ and ‘Here in the Land our Fathers Loved’, shofar blasts sounded from all the synagogues, and Torah scrolls were taken out of the holy arks and were caught up in the dancing, and ‘God will rebuild Galilee’ and ‘Come and behold/ how great is this day’, and later in the small hours of the morning, Mr. Auster suddenly opened his shop and the kiosks in Zephania Street and Geula Street and Chancellor Street and the Jaffa Road and King George Avenue opened and the bars opened up all over the city and handed out soft drinks and snacks and even alcoholic drinks until the first light of dawn, bottles of fruit drink, beer and wine passed from hand to hand and from mouth to mouth, strangers hugged each other in the streets and kissed each other with tears, and startled English policemen were also dragged into the circles of dancers and softened up with cans of beer and sweet liqueurs, and frenzied revellers climbed up on British armoured cars and waved the flag of the state that had not been established yet, but tonight over there in Lake Success, it had been decided that it had the right to be established. And it would be established one hundred and sixty-seven days and nights later, on Friday the fourteenth of May 1948.”



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The Arab response, however, was violence, with the first attack of the war against Jews in Palestine taking place just seven hours after the UN General Assembly vote.

Part 2: The First Stage of the War - November 30, 1947 – April 2, 1948

This first stage of the war saw many attacks by local Arabs against Jews. In total during this period 1,000 Jewish lives were lost to these attacks. The focus of these attacks was generally not in cities or within Jewish settlements but were focused mainly on the access roads to Jewish areas. The road that was affected the most by these attacks was the main road that followed the Ayalon valley from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Today that road is called Route 1 and is a modern multi-lane highway. However, in the 1940s it was a narrow single-lane dirt track. It was so narrow that if two vehicles were approaching each other from different directions, the vehicle going down to the coast would have to go off the side of the road to allow the climbing vehicle to maintain its momentum. This road was significant for the Jewish Yishuv as it was the only access road to Jerusalem that did not go through major Arab cities. It was therefore very easy for Arab militia to attack this access road to Jerusalem and cut off all supplies to the city. The dirt track could easily be blocked by a single boulder and then the Jewish vehicles were easy targets in the narrow valley road that led up to Jerusalem.

The style of warfare the Arabs used was called *Fazah*. A single Arab could sit on a hillside overlooking the blocked section of the road and as he saw the Jewish trucks and vehicles approaching, he would signal to all the Arabs in the local vicinity to attack the convoy. It was a short, sharp, and brutal style of attack that was virtually impossible to defend against. The result of these attacks on the road to Jerusalem was that the 100,000 Jewish residence of Jerusalem were under siege in the harsh winter of 1947/8. Supplies from the coastal plain could barely get through which resulted in shortages of food, water, fuel, and medicines.



The remains of an armed truck at the Bab el-Wad section of the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem Road



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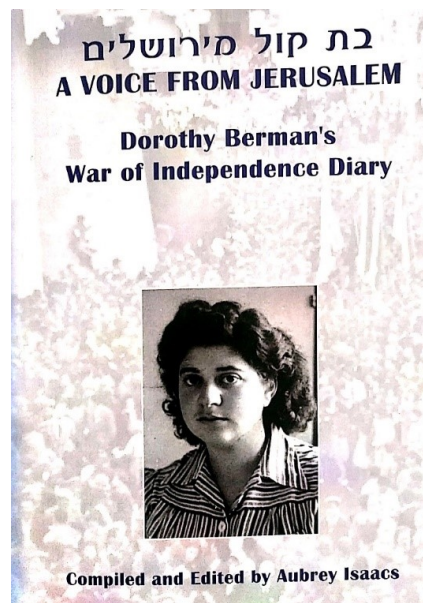
Alexander Muss High School in Israel teacher Aubrey Issacs has compiled a book with the diary entries, photographs, and letters of his mother, of blessed memory, Dorothy Berman who spent a year in Israel at the Machon L'Madrichei Chutz L'Aretz, in that fateful year of 1947/48. In it she describes the shortages in Jerusalem at the time. For example:

Saturday, April 3, 1948

We have no water!

Aubrey makes the following note to this entry:

No convoys at all managed to get to Jerusalem between March 26 and April 6, bringing the water shortage to severe proportions. Water no longer available through the taps, was distributed to the population on the backs of donkeys from where it was rationed out. My mother frequently told of the manner of multiple usage of the water ration. The population was instructed to drink half the daily ration. The rest of the water was re-used first for cooking, then for washing foods, washing utensils, washing the body and then for washing the floor. The remaining drops of water were collected after each usage. The final usage was once a day to collect all remaining water in order to be able to flush the toilet.



With many of the Jewish settlements under siege, especially Jerusalem, it seemed that the UN Partition Plan was doomed and even the United States withdrew their support for the plan. Despite this, David Ben-Gurion, chairman of the Jewish Agency and Prime Minister in waiting, was determined not to miss this historic opportunity for Statehood. However, he believed without Jerusalem there could be no State. Without Zion, he argued, there could be no Zionism.



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“The value of Jerusalem cannot be measured or weighed or counted; rather, if a land can have a soul, then Jerusalem is the soul of the land of Israel. The struggle for Jerusalem is decisive, and not only in the military sense. We must not only secure the road to Jerusalem and protect our positions there, but rather we must strengthen her standing in general. Jerusalem demands of us and deserves for us to stand with her. The vow which we made on the Rivers of Babylon, ‘If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its cunning...’ is as compelling and obligatory today as it was in those days. Otherwise we will not be deserving of the name the People of Israel.”

--David Ben-Gurion, 1948

But in order to secure Jewish Jerusalem, the access road to Jerusalem must be secured. For that to happen the Jewish forces needed to secure the hills overlooking the road, but in order to secure the hills, the Jewish forces must take the offensive and remove any Arab fighting forces from the villages in the Jerusalem corridor.

Part 3: Operation Nachshon - April 2, 1948 – May 14, 1948

According to Jewish tradition, Nachshon ben Aminadav was the first Jew to walk into the Red Sea before God carried out the miracle of the splitting of the sea. It is for this reason that the name chosen for the first Jewish offensive operation of the war was called Operation Nachshon. The aim of the operation was to remove any Arab fighting forces from the Arab villages in the Jerusalem corridor in order to free the access road to Jerusalem of further *Fazah* attacks. The first and most important of these villages that needed to be conquered was an Arab military outpost, dominating the entrance to Jerusalem, The Kastel. The site was originally a Crusader fort (hence the name) that controlled the road to Jerusalem, and subsequently became an Arab village. Come the beginning of April 1948 the village was evacuated of its civilian population and was used exclusively as an Arab military outpost. Without the capturing of the village, the road to Jerusalem would be blocked to Jewish traffic.

*There is much to say about the displacement of Arab civilians in the war of Independence. Israeli historiography traditionally claimed that the Arab populations left of their own accord either out of fear or because the Arab leadership claimed that they will destroy the Jewish State and then allow locals to return to their homes. Palestinian historiography claims that the Jewish forces forcibly removed Arabs from their homes. In truth, both accounts are true, with various factors coming to play at different locations. In the village of the Kastel the local population were evacuated by the Arab military leadership, before the major Jewish offensive.



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View of the Kastel from the road

The Palmach, the Hagganah's elite strike force, was given the task of capturing the Kastel and managed to capture the hilltop village on April 3. The elite soldiers were then given the task of capturing the next Arab stronghold and the Kastel was left in the hands of regular Hagganah fighters, many of them new immigrants to the country. These soldiers were then subject to various attempts by the Arab forces to recapture the Kastel. These counter attacks were led by the commander of Arab forces in the region, Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni. The Jewish forces, under a ferocious onslaught managed amazingly to hold on to the position. Al-Husayni himself was killed when investigating the situation on the hill on the foggy morning of the April 7. His body was abandoned in the field and when the Arab forces heard that their leader had fallen in battle, the Kastel was the subject of the largest *Fazah* in the war. The exhausted Hagganah soldiers were unable to defend the position from such a massive attack and were forced to retreat. In this retreat, a spur of the moment decision by the offices in command, set the tone for the spirit of the IDF forever more. Instead of retreating first and letting the privates cover



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the retreat, the officers insisted “the privates will retreat as the officers stay behind to cover”. Many of these officers gave up the lives protecting the soldiers who were under their command.



Palestinian fighters attacking the Kastel

The Arabs were holding the Kastel once more and the Hagannah was given the task of recapturing the position as without it the road to Jerusalem will be closed. This time the Kastel was captured with barely a shot being fired. When the Hagganah forces returned to the Kastel they found the position virtually empty of Arab forces as they were attending the funeral of their commander on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. From this point on the Kastel remained in Jewish hands and the gateway to Jerusalem was open.

The battle of Castel is important for three reasons. Firstly, it was the first major offensive operation carried out by the Jewish forces in the war. Secondly it was a key victory for the Hagganah as it opened the road to Jerusalem. And lastly the ethos of the Israeli army, of officers protecting the lives of the soldiers whom they command has been the bedrock of the IDF ever since.

Equally, defeat in the battle of the Kastel was extremely significant for the Arab forces. Within a matter of days, the local Arabs lost the Kastel, their military commander, and just a few days later suffered a bloody defeat in the village of Dir Yassin. The exaggeration of what happened at Dir Yassin had a massive psychological effect on the local Arab population. So much so that all these events were the bedrock for what they would later be called the *Nakba* or tragedy of the Palestinian national struggle. The Jewish victory in the Kastel and subsequently in the rest of the war was considered a terrible defeat for many Palestinians.



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Part 4: The Human Cost of Victory

In the 1940s Nathan Alterman was one of Israel's most popular poets. He wrote a weekly opinion column for the newspaper *Davar*. What was amazing about his column is that he did not write his cutting, sharp analysis of the current situation in the country in prose, but in verse. In the middle of the War of Independence he penned his most famous poem, "The Silver Platter":

The Earth grows still.
The lurid sky slowly pales
Over smoking borders.
Heartsick, but still living, a people stand by
To greet the uniqueness
of the miracle.

Readied, they wait beneath the moon,
Wrapped in awesome joy, before the light.
– Then, soon,
A girl and boy step forward,
And slowly walk before the waiting nation;

In work garb and heavy-shod
They climb
In stillness.
Wearing yet the dress of battle, the grime
Of aching day and fire-filled night.

Unwashed, weary unto death, not knowing rest,
But wearing youth like dewdrops in their hair.
– Silently the two approach
And stand.
Are they of the quick or of the dead?

Through wondering tears, the people stare.
"Who are you, the silent two?"
And they reply: "We are the silver platter
Upon which the Jewish State was served to you."

And speaking, fall in shadow at the nation's feet.
Let the rest in Israel's chronicles be told.



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This poem was a sharp critique of society in Tel Aviv, celebrating the establishment of the Jewish State while forgetting the human sacrifice of the soldiers on the front lines. The dead soldiers, according to Alterman, were the Silver Platter upon which the Jewish State was given to the Jewish people.

If you go to Kibbutz Kiryat Anavim today, you can see that Silver Platter. Kiryat Anavim served as the headquarters for the *Haganah* in Operation Nachshon and as such its cemetery was used as the military cemetery for the soldiers who died in the operation. It is unique as it is the only military cemetery in Israel that has buried in it the soldiers from one brigade who fell on a particular operation. And the numbers are staggering: out of the 1,200 soldiers of brigade, 418 of them were killed in the operation.

When visiting the cemetery, it is amazing to read the tombstones of the soldiers as one begins to understand the human cost of the victory. There are soldiers from all over the world, speaking many different languages, from teenagers to men in their 40s.

This tombstone is particularly poignant:



This soldier died in the battle in Katamon in Jerusalem and all that was known of him was first name; Benny and his nickname Berala. Nothing else.



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Another tombstone:



This tombstone belongs to Yosef Koplovitch, who was born in Poland, made *aliyah* in 1948 and fell in battle in 1948 at the age of 17. It is impossible to know what that young boy went through in the last nine years of his life, but one can only imagine. What we do know is that he was one of the 300,000 Jewish survivors out of a pre-war population of 3.3 million, who managed to make *aliyah* in 1948, only to fall in battle in less than a year after arriving in the Israel. He is the “Silver Platter” upon which the Jewish State was served to us.

יהי זכרו ברוך

May his memory, as well as all those who gave their lives in these battles, be a blessing to us all.



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