

# Yitzhak Epstein

## THE HIDDEN QUESTION.

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Among the difficult issues regarding the rebirth of our people in its homeland, one issue outweighs them all: our relations with the Arabs. This issue, upon whose correct resolution hinges the revival of our national hope, has not been forgotten by the Zionists but has gone completely unnoticed by them and, in its true form, is barely mentioned in the literature of our movement. Although in recent years some disconnected words about this have appeared in various writings, these, however, have been in the context of claims by the Jews in Palestine (Eretz Israel) who deny the possibility of any real Zionist effort, or in accounts of the Arab nationalist movement. The loyal Zionists have not yet dealt with the issue of what our attitude to the Arab should be when we come to buy land from them in Palestine, to found settlements and, in general, to settle the country. The Zionists' lack of attention to an issue so basic to the settlement is not intentional; it went unnoticed because they were not familiar with the country and its inhabitants, and, furthermore had no national or political awareness.

The sad fact that it is possible to ignore a fundamental issue like this, and after 30 years of settlement activity to speak about it as if it were new, virtually proves the irresponsibility of our movement, which deals with issues superficially and does not delve into their core.

Since the emergence of the national movement, Zionist leaders have continuously studied the arrangements and the laws of the land, but the question of people who are settled there, its workers and its true owners, has not arisen, not in practice and not in theory..... While governmental procedures, the difficulties in purchasing land and constructing homes, the ban against entry of Jews - these and more have hampered immigration to Palestine, obstacles related to Arabs do not appear numerous. And if our brothers in Palestine did not entirely grasp the seriousness of the question, it certainly did not occur to the Zionists who live far from the arena of activity. We devote attention to everything related to our homeland, we discuss and debate everything, we praise and criticise in every way, but one trivial thing we have overlooked so long in our lovely country: there exists an entire people who have held it for centuries and to whom it would never occur to leave.

For a number of years we have been hearing that the population of the country exceeds 600,000. Assuming that this number is correct, even if we deduct from it 80,000 Jews, there are still over half a million Arabs in our land, 80 percent of whom support themselves exclusively by farming and own all the arable land. The time has come to dispel the misconceptions among the Zionists that land in Palestine lies uncultivated for lack of working hands or laziness of the local residents. There are no deserted fields. Indeed every Arab peasant tries to add to his plot from the adjoining land, if additional work is not required. Near the cities they even plow the sloped hillsides and, near Mettulah, the indigent Arab peasants plant between the boulders, as they do in Lebanon, not allowing an inch of the land to lie fallow. Therefore, when we come to take over the land, the question immediately arises: what will the Arab peasant do when we buy their lands from them?...

In general we have made a crude psychological blunder in our relationship with a large, if assertive and passionate people. At a time when we are feeling the love of the homeland with all our might, the land of our forefathers, we are forgetting that the people who live there now also have a

sensitive heart and a loving soul. The Arab, like any man, has a strong bond with his homeland; the lower his level of development and the more narrow his perspective, the stronger his bond to the land and to the region, and the harder it is for him to part from his village and his field. The Muslim will not abandon his country, will not wander far: he has many traditions which bind him to the soil of his homeland, the most dear to him being respect for the graves of his forefathers. To understand the depth of this feeling, one has to know that these Orientals venerate their dead, and they visit their graves and involve their ancestors in the events of their lives, their celebrations and their sorrows. I can still hear the dirge of the Arab women on the day their families left their village of Ja'una, today Rosh Pina, to settle in Hawran, east of the Jordan. The men rode asses and the women walked behind them, bitterly weeping, and the valley was filled with their keening. From time to time they would stop to kiss the stones and the earth. Even when the fellahin themselves sell some of the village land, the issue of acquisition is not resolved. The fellah, in anguish from the burden of heavy taxes, may decide in a moment of despair and sometimes with the encouragement of the village elders, who receive a hefty sum for this to sell the field; but the sale leaves him with a festering wound that reminds him of the cursed day that his land fell into the hands of strangers. I have known fellahin who, after they sold the land, worked for the Jews together with their wives and who managed to save money. As long as the wages were good, they sealed their lips, but when the work ended, they began to grumble against the Jews and dispute the purchase.

Can we rely on such a method of land acquisition? Will it succeed and does it serve our goals? A hundred times no. A nation which declared: "but the land must not be sold beyond reclaim", and which gives preference to the rights of one who cultivates the land over one who buys it, must not and cannot confiscate land from those who work it and settled on it in good faith. We must not uproot people from land to which they and their forefathers dedicated their best efforts and toil. If there are farmers who water their fields with their sweat, these are the Arabs. Who could place of value all the toil of the fellah, plowing in torrential rains, reaping in the hot summer, loading and transporting the harvest?....

But let us leave justice and sensitivity aside for a moment and look at the question only from the point of view of feasibility. Let us assume that in the land of our forefathers we don't have to care about others and we are allowed - perhaps even obligated - to purchase all the lands obtainable. Can this type of land acquisition continue? Will those who are dispossessed remain silent and accept what is being done to them? In the end, they will wake up and return to us in blows what we have looted from them with our gold! They will seek legal redress against the foreigners who have torn them from their lands. And who knows, but they will then be both the prosecutors and the judges... The people are brave, armed, excellent marksman, have superb cavalry,, and are zealous of the nation and especially have not yet weakened; they are after all but a fraction of a large nation which controls all the surrounding lands: Syria, Iraq, Arabia and Egypt.

It's easy to dismiss these words and to view them as disloyalty to the ancient and eternal national ideal. But if we weigh the matter disinterestedly, we must admit that it would be folly not to consider with whom we are dealing and the extent of our power and the power against us. Heaven forbid that we close our eyes to what is happening sooner, perhaps, than we imagine. One can definitely say, that at the present time, there is no Arab national or political movement in Palestine. But this people has no real need of a movement: it is large and numerous and does not require a revival because it never ceased to exist for even a moment. In its physical growth, it exceeds all the nations of Europe... Let us not make light of its rights, and especially let us not, Heaven forbid, take advantage of the evil exultation of their own brothers. Let us not tease a sleeping lion! Let us not depend upon the ash that covers the embers: one spark escapes, and soon it will be a conflagration out of control.

It is not my belief that in our homeland we must be servile and surrender to its inhabitants. But we

can dwell among them in courage and strength, secure in our settlements; and in the land of sun, we shall also refresh ourselves, renew our blood and be heartened. But we sin against our nation and our future if we facilely cast aside our choicest weapon: the justice and the purity of our cause. As long as we hold to these principles, we are mighty and need fear no one, but if we abandon them - our strength is in vain and our courage for nought...

The Jewish settlement has already given bountifully to the inhabitants of the land: the situation of the towns and villages near new settlements has improved; hundreds of craftsmen - masons, builders, painters, donkey and camel handlers - and thousands of labourers have found work in the settlements; commerce has increased, as has the demand for dairy products and produce. And yet all this cannot make up for what we have distorted. For the good we shall not be remembered, but the bad will not be forgotten. It is impossible to buy love, but how easy to establish enemies among the simple fellahin. Powerful is the passion of those who have been uprooted from their land.

It is time to open our eyes to our methods! If we don't want to ruin our work, we must consider every step we take in our homeland, and we must urgently solve the question of our relations with the Arabs before it becomes the "Jewish question". We must not rest content with the current situation! Heaven forbid that we should digress even momentarily from our act of creation, from the future, but whenever what we believe to be the national good violates human justice, this good will become a national sin from which there is no repentance. Our ideal is so noble and our young people yearn to realize in it the social ideals which throb in humanity these days. But this means that we must distance ourselves from the ugly and from anything which resembled it, i.e. from every deed tainted with plunder.

When they come to our homeland, we must uproot all sorts of conquest or expropriation. Our motto must be: live and let live! Let us not cause harm to any nation, and certainly not to a numerous people, whose enmity is very dangerous...

After we own the uncultivated land, we shall turn our attention to the cultivated land. This will be acquired not to expel the tenants but on condition of having them remain on the land and improving their lot by introducing good agricultural methods. Gradually they will switch from the old ways of extensive farming to intensive farming. When the land yields better returns, it will be sufficient for the Jews and the fellahin together. As enlightened owners, we will devote some money to improving the lot of the tenants, because their welfare is our welfare. We shall benefit the residents, not furtively with bribes or gold in order to rid ourselves of them but in true material and spiritual ways. Our agronomists will advise them, teaching them the sciences of agriculture, husbandry and cross-breeding, and show them the scientific ways to fight cattle and poultry epidemics and pests of the field, vineyard and garden. They will be able to cheaply purchase medicines against disease and, when in need, will have access to the Jewish doctor. Their children will be accepted in our schools, and when we can relieve the burden of the tithe, they will also be relieved. Although in the early days they will view us with suspicion, not believing the innovations and even less the innovators, but from day to day our integrity will become evident, and they will see the innocence of our aspirations and benefit of our reforms, which will undoubtedly succeed in the hands are such a diligent, wise and frugal people. The Arab fellah is smart and has more commonsense than the farmers of many other countries. And then the Arab tenants will know us at our best, and they will not curse the day the Jews came to settle their land but will remember it as a day of redemption and salvation....

This is not a dream. It is difficult but easy, loyal and more productive than the systems that we used until now. If instead of disinheriting the Druze from Mettulah, we would divide the land with them, then we would not have to spend even half of what we spend on bribes to the wicked, expulsion of indigent families, court cases and lawyers, and untenable compromises. We would not have to

enslave ourselves to the butchers, and we would sit in security with our neighbours and work our plots in security. Druze respect education, and they would send their sons and daughters to our schools, and in coming generations we could find in them not only honest neighbours but also loyal friends. And this is true of other settlements. We have spent a fortune to gain sworn enemies at a time that we could have spent less - or even more - and acquired friends, enhanced our honour, sanctified the name of Israel and advanced our goals --- opening the ports of hearts, which are more important than the ports of the coast.

Our methods of land acquisition must be a direct extension of our relations with the Arab nation in general. The principles which should guide us when we settle among this nation are as follows:

A the Jewish people, the foremost with regard to justice and the law, egalitarianism and the brotherhood of man, respects not only the individual rights of every person but also the national rights of every nation and ethnic group.

B the people of Israel, yearning for rebirth, is in solidarity - in belief and deed - with all nations who are awakening to life and treats their aspirations with love and goodwill and fosters in them their sense of national identity.

These two principles must be the basis of our relations with the Arabs....

We must therefore enter into a covenant with the Arabs which will be productive to both sides and to humanity as a whole. We will certainly agree to this covenant, but it also requires the agreement of the other side; and that we shall gain gradually through practical deeds which are of benefit to the land, to us and to the Arabs....

We shall be an angel of peace, who mediates among the discordant religious sects, and we can do all this in the purity of our aspirations and our beliefs, we alone, not others.

And when we bring education to our ally and work together with him, let us not forget one principle.. Just as the teacher is obliged to know the soul of his pupil and his inclinations, so too it is not enough to hold before us the end goal, but we must also have a proper understanding of the Arab nation, its characteristics, inclinations, hopes, language, literature and especially a deep understanding of his life, customs, pain and suffering.... We are entering an environment still living in the sixteenth century, and in all we do we must take into consideration the spiritual condition of this nation today. If we desire to lead someone anywhere, we must take them from where he is right now; otherwise he would not be able to follow us. We must, therefore, study and understand the psyche of our neighbours. It's shameful to say that we have not yet done anything at all about this, that no Jew has yet devoted himself to this study, and that we are absolutely ignorant of everything regarding Arabs and that all that we do know is gleaned at the market place. It is time to educate!

One can object to this lecture on several grounds, but on one thing, the lecturer dares assert with certainty: these words were said in the spirit of our nation, in the spirit of world justice, imprinted on us ever since we became a people.

The prophet of the Diaspora, when he came to speak about the division of the land, said: " you shall divide it by lot for an inheritance unto you and unto the strangers that sojourn among you, which shall beget children among you, and they shall be unto you as native-born children of Israel, they shall have inheritance with you among the tribes of Israel. And in whatever tribe the stranger sojourns, there shall you give him his inheritance, says the Lord God." [Ezekiel,47: 22-23](#).

As great prophet from Anatot, who preceded Ezekiel, when he came to prophesise bad tidings to the evil neighbours who threatened the inheritance of Israel, concludes: " And after I have plucked them up, I will again have compassion on them, and I will bring them again each to his heritage and each to his land. And it shall come to pass, if they will diligently learn the ways of my people.... Then shall they be built up in the midst of my people" [Jeremiah 12, 15-16](#)..

Come, let us teach them the right path; we shall build them up, and we to shall be built.