LETTERS.

SHARON AND THE SINAI

Washington, D.C.

It is easy to quibble over interpretation and opinion, which is what Lesley Hazleton's article, "The Moderating of Arik Sharon" [The Nation, Nov. 14], essentially is, no matter how wrong-headed and naive the interpretations or opinions may be. However, in addition to her rather odd view of what was essentially a realistic, all-round portrait of Sharon, Hazleton makes some serious errors in fact, which cloud and put in question the remainder of her pronouncements and judgments.

Hazleton suggests that Sharon was a strong opponent of Camp David and the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, and that "Begin signed the treaty over the forceful opposition of his current defense minister, Arik Sharon." She goes on to say that "Sharon almost managed to sabotage the accords."

I myself saw Sharon forcefully raise his hand to vote for the treaty in the Israeli Cabinet, surely the place where he would have forcefully stated his opposition. More important, however, is the fact that Sharon had a positive effect on the Camp David negotiations, helping to break what appeared to be a deadly impasse over the Sinai. Ezer Weizmann, in his recent memoirs, The Battle for Peace, remembers Begin not budging on the issue of giving up the Sinai settlements and how Sadat was equally adamant about the issue. It was suggested that a call be put in to Sharon to help budge Begin, even though Sharon was the administrator of Israel's settlement policy. After the call was made, there was a surprising result. "A few hours later," Weizmann writes, "a deeply moved Begin was telling the Israeli delegation that Arik Sharon had phoned him; to his surprise, Sharon was in favor of evacuating the settlements in Sinai if they were the last remaining obstacle to a peace agreement." Weizmann, a keen observer at Camp David, goes on to say that "Sharon's intervention was bound to have some influence on Begin's eventual decision," which it did.

Thus, this is a far cry from the man who supposedly wanted to sabotage Camp David. It is more accurate to say that Sharon had a significant role in saving the treaty.

Amos Perlmutter

HAZLETON REPLIES

New York City

Professor Perlmutter's "all-round portrait" in The New York Times Magazine was decidedly semicircular. The other half of the circle is hardly suited to a future prime minister. Thus Sharon's supporters such as Perlmutter abstoemously refrain from any mention of Gush Emunim, although Sharon has been a forceful supporter ("forceful" being the Sharon adjective par excellence) of the movement since its inception and its representative in the Cabinet since 1977.

I would certainly not quibble with the deciption of Sharon as a pragmatist of power. But Sharon's sudden about-face in response to a telephone call from a close friend on the Camp David negotiating team does not add up to "a significant role in saving the treaty." Rather, Menachem Begin could not sign the accords without the assurance that he would not face an all-out attack from Sharon on his return to Israel.

The fact that both before and after Camp David, Sharon was urging extended Jewish settlement, first in the Sinai itself and then in the Gaza Strip, did not prevent him from acceding to the pragmatic demands of the time.

To quote Ezer Weizmann in justification of Sharon is insulting to Weizmann's whole assessment of the man, let alone to the courageous stand Weizmann took all through the peace negotiations. Others can quote too. In the same book, Weizmann describes Sharon's strategy as one of "trickery and ruses, indirect approaches and direct luges." In war, Weizmann says, "I'd follow [Sharon] through fire and flood. ... But political life has different rules. Sharon has lost sight of the distinction between his own personal good and the good of the state."

Sharon's style of pragmatism—the expedience of power—has paid off. Now he is defense minister and being mooted by such as Perlmutter for prime minister. Meanwhile the system of trickery and ruses continues.

One example: the new Sharon-appointed civilian administrator of the West Bank, Prof. Menachem Milson, is the same Lieut. Col. Menachem Millson who was the Arab-affairs adviser to the military government of the West Bank until three years ago. The policy and the man remain the same; only the clothing has changed. The same might be said of Sharon.

Lesley Hazleton

EDITORIAL.

Our own perspective on the Arab-Israeli conflict is not simply the sum of the views expressed by the contributors to this issue—indeed, we have differences, major and minor, with each of our essayists. But we also believe that they have managed to pierce the rhetorical haze that envelops this topic.

George Orwell once pointed out that political chaos may be both a cause and an effect of the decay of language, adding, "A man may take a drink because he feels himself a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks." Nowhere is this semantic vicious cycle more apparent than in the American vocabulary of Middle East politics. Commentators and editorial writers, on both the left and the right, invertebrately refer to supporters of Menachem Begin's government as "pro-Israel" and to those who favor dealing with the Palestine Liberation Organization as "anti-Israel." Of course Israelis rarely make this mistake, because many of them who are anti-Begin are "pro-Israel" by any reasonable definition, and a sizable minority of patriotic Israeli dissenters favors—under various conditions—negotiating with the P.L.O.

Unhappily, Israel's security is indeed precarious. But, in the long run, an even greater threat than P.L.O. terrorists may be a danger from within. Israel's democratic character—and its legitimacy and distinctiveness as a Middle Eastern state—is placed in increasing jeopardy with the passage of each day of military subjugation for 1.2 million Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza. The more "successful" Israel is in introducing a large settler population into the occupied territories, the closer it is to becoming a total garrison state. If such a dark outcome is in prospect, there can be no sentiment more pro-Israel than that expressed by the Israeli writer and editor Yael Lotan: "In my opinion nothing is worse than the continued occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip... the Zionist dream is fast turning into a nightmare. We must therefore resolve to get out—not negotiate or haggle but simply get out of there."

Among the misconceptions obscuring the road out of the present impasse are those having to do with the nature of contemporary Zionism. In the United States, this confusion is largely the result of the popular media's ignorance of or refusal to acknowledge the differences of opinion in Israel
and among American Jews on the meaning of Zionism.

It is necessary to remember that this debate has deep historical roots. Did Zionism mean a homeland for all Jews? Was this homeland for Jews and no other people? Was it intended for those Jews who wanted to go there and whomever else cared to join them? These questions were all debated in the 1920s and 1930s, and since a majority of Jews were opposed to what Evron calls "messianic" Zionism, which expected all Jews to emigrate to Israel, it was impossible to equate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism.

As Evron suggests, after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, it gradually became clear that messianic Zionism—with its assertion that all Jews are one nation, that the ingathering of the Diaspora is the raison d'etre of Israel—was an outmoded or unrealistic idea. And so the Israeli intellectual Uri Avnery could write in 1975 that Zionism was dead. "Zionism meant the ingathering of exiles," he said, "but people are just not coming here."

Some would prefer to put it more positively: political Zionism succeeded in creating a state called Israel, a Hebrew nation in a part of historical Palestine. One can use the word Hebrew as a convenient way to describe a people with a common language, culture and national identity, which Zionism, as it happens, helped create in Palestine. This definition of Israeli identity is therefore perhaps helpful to an understanding of the present situation, for if there has developed out of Zionism a Hebrew people indigenous to Palestine, then the right of those people to self-determination cannot be challenged, even by the Palestinian Arabs who were dispossessed by the 1948 war. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict can then be understood in a quite different light. In a "post-Zionist era," it is not a conflict between Arab and Jew, but between Arab Palestinian and Hebrew Palestinian. Such cumbersome language can be further refined: it is a conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Just as there is a distinctly Israeli identity (Hebrew as opposed to merely Jewish), there is also a Palestinian (Arab) identity.

The most articulate proponent of this viewpoint is Hillel Kook, who referred to a "Hebrew" rather than an "Israeli" nation when we first met in Tel Aviv several years ago. Kook is an Israeli patriot who has made a unique passage
through twentieth-century Zionism. Born into a family of revered rabbis, Kook was for many years a follower of Begin’s mentor, Vladimir Zeev Jabotinsky, and he and Begin were colleagues in the Irgun military organization. Kook’s Zionism, however, differed in one major way from that of the founders of Israel. Like them, he sought the establishment of a new political state. But Begin, Chaim Weizmann, David Ben-Gurion and others ended up creating a progressively more theocratic state, while Kook sought a Hebrew secular state whose creation would mark the end of political Zionism (and would, therefore, perhaps appear less alien to its Arab neighbors). Ben Gurion et al. prevailed, of course, but only in a formal sense, for today most Israelis are neither religious nor messianic Zionists. They are Israeli sabras, Hebrews whose definition of Zionism is synonomous with Israeli patriotism.

At our meeting, Kook pulled out his Israeli identity card and exclaimed, “Look, Israel is the only state in the world that legally defines ‘Arab’ as a nationality. Here on my identity card I must claim to be either ‘Arab’ or ‘Jewish.’ In fact, I fought for the establishment of Israel precisely to become an Israeli Palestinian. Yes, yes, I am a Palestinian, a Hebrew in a political state called Israel located in historical Palestine.”

What relevance, you may ask, does this idea of national identities for the Hebrews and the Palestinians have to the prospects for peace in the Middle East—especially since a settlement can’t be externally imposed but must arise out of direct dealings between the Israelis and the Palestinians?

The answer is twofold. First, this approach may undermine the harmful consequences of traditional definitions. Messianic Zionism’s claim of a Jewish right to Eretz Israel, the biblical Holy Land, impels modern Israelis to conclude, as did an early Zionist, Dr. Arthur Ruppin, in 1936, “It is our destiny to be in a state of continual warfare with the Arabs.” Begin’s Zionism would deny the Palestinians the right to self-determination in any portion of British-mandated Palestine. On the grounds of “national security,” Begin proclaims Israel’s right to erect settlements on West Bank land seized from Palestinians. This logic leads inexorably to the title of Rabbi Meir Kahane’s new book, They Must Go, in which the American-born founder of the Jewish Defense League argues that the Palestinians must be expelled from the occupied territories and Israel.

Second, recognition that the conflict is between the Israelis and the Palestinian nationalist movement could lay the groundwork on the Israeli side for the beginnings of a politics of compromise. Although there have been Hebrew nationalists who were also territorial maximalists, in our view the logic of competing nationalist movements argues for territorial compromise, a two-state solution.

Messianic Zionism, because it claims that all Jews everywhere are one nation, requires Begin to seek a victorious peace for all Jews. As Golda Meir once told a group of tired soldiers on the Golan Heights in the midst of the 1973 war: “If all the blood that was shed in keeping Israel alive was only for the 3 million [Israelis] of today, it is not worthwhile.”

There is, of course, in many such mystical appeals a grain of truth. And we acknowledge a qualification to our view of Israel in the post-Zionist era. Israel rose in part out of the ashes of the Nazi Holocaust. And so at least for the generation of Jewish survivors of that incomprehensible horror Israel will be and must be more than a merely symbolic refuge. Thus, the Law of Return is grounded in historical reality, despite its residue of mysticism.

As for the Palestinians, we must start with the fact that they formally reject the politics of partition. The P.L.O.’s covenant does state that “Israel is the instrument of the Zionist movement . . . [and] the liberation of Palestine will destroy the Zionist and imperialist presence.” But here again the language of myth conceals reality. The leadership of the Palestinian movement perpetrates certain myths for its own short-term survival in sectarian feuds. One of the cruelest of these myths is the promise of “martyrdom” to young men and women who volunteer for suicide missions into Israel. In fact, these lives are sacrifices in a propaganda war waged solely to keep alive the myth that a military victory can be achieved against Israel. The genuine martyrs are P.L.O. leaders like Said Hammami and others who publicly accepted the politics of partition and then became victims of Palestinian fratricide.

The stubborn refusal of the P.L.O. to amend its covenant has in turn given rise to another myth—that there has been no evolution in the P.L.O.’s political program. Actually, its positions have changed a great deal. Since the 1974 meeting of the Palestine National Council, when the “Transitional Program” was adopted, the P.L.O. has been committed to accepting sovereignty over any portion of Palestine.

There is, in fact, a great deal of private and public debate within the Palestinian community, but it is a debate carried on at high personal risk. The Palestinian people are encouraged by their leaders to believe that they are in a state of war with Israel; thus any advocacy of “moderation” inevitably draws charges of treason.

These circumstances are exacerbated by the “umbrella” structure of the P.L.O., which shelters parties that range across the ideological spectrum. This apparent unity lends support to still another myth—that the P.L.O. is a national liberation movement like any other Third World guerrilla group. It is not. There is no unity of command or political direction. Yasir Arafat is chairman by default because of his great talent for not antagonizing the P.L.O.’s disparate member organizations. Before any political initiative can be taken, there must be near unanimity among these groups.

The P.L.O. is also constrained by another condition of its existence. It must cater to its most vociferous and militant constituency, the Palestinians in the refugee camps in Lebanon. And though few knowledgeable observers question the P.L.O.’s mandate to represent all Palestinians, the fact that the largest concentration of the Palestinians in exile live in Jordan under the absolute rule of King Hussein exercises a strong influence on the P.L.O.’s political course. Obviously, any democratic evolution within the P.L.O. —and,
perforce, the creation of an Arab Palestinian state—must involve these "Jordanian" Palestinians, as well as the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza.

Herein lies one of the more intractable myths of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict—the "Jordanian solution." The Palestinians supposedly seek to establish a Palestinian state, the myth runs, but there is, in fact, already a state called Jordan in which more than 50 percent of the population is Palestinian. Hence, Jordan is at least part of a Palestinian homeland. Indeed, it might have become that if the Palestinians had had the political maturity and organization to seize power in Jordan prior to the June 1967 war. They finally made their move in the 1970 "Black September" civil war but were crushed by Hussein's British-trained and American-supplied Bedouin army. Yet many Palestinians still endorse the proposition that "the road to Jerusalem lies through Amman."

Whether Hussein is an obstacle or the key to Palestinian self-determination is not for us to say. The Palestinians are not particularly enamored of Hussein, but the monarch, an astute political survivor, has since 1974 been careful not to speak on their behalf. He might well some day step aside or become a constitutional monarch of a Palestinian state encompassing both banks of the Jordan River. Shlomo Avineri's view of a two-state solution is provocative:

Whether it be called Palestine, Palestine-Jordan, the United Arab Kingdom or the Republic of Palestine will be up to its population: but the Palestinian people cannot and should not be dissected into two states—a West Bank-Gaza state on the one hand and the Kingdom of Jordan on the other [see symposium, "A Peace Israel Can Live With," The Nation, November 3, 1979].

When this might happen and under what conditions no one can say. Pessimism is a ready anodyne. To the people in the region, U.S. policy in the Middle East must seem insensitive, opportunistic (read oil-hungry) and plain dangerous in an age of nuclear weaponry. Furthermore, Israel's economic and strategic dependence on the United States is extremely debilitating to the client. Only if time brings a diminishing of American intervention in the region can we look forward to a peaceful accommodation between Israeli and Arab Palestinians. Until then, we can only attempt to demystify the nationalistic passions that grip this tormenting and holy part of the world.

ARTICLES.

Israel After Zionism

BOAS EVRON

Before he founded Zionism, Theodore Herzl, that quintessential assimilated Jew, had a wonderful idea for the solution of the "Jewish problem": all Jews should convert simultaneously to Christianity, and the problem would fade away. Zionism was essentially the same solution. If Jews had a country of their own, like other peoples, they would cease to be "Jews," and the problem would fade away.

There is, however, a basic difference between the two solutions. The first solution was based on the assumption that only the barrier of religion kept Jews from full participation in Christian European civilization. The second solution assumed that Jews were basically a nation, and that religion was only one aspect of their identity. Unlike other nations, the Jews lacked a land of their own, making them "abnormal" and causing the unpleasant traits that anti-Semites ascribed to them (there was a surprising correspondence between some anti-Semitic stereotypes and the traits that the early Zionists purported to find in Diaspora Jews). Religion was perceived as a "protective covering" assumed by the nation during the Exile for the purpose of self-preservation. Once the nation was reassembled in its homeland, Jews would achieve dignity and security, and be defended by their own army. No longer would they need the protective covering of religion; the real Jewish culture would blossom forth, revealing "the true Jewish essence."

But now, more than a century after the founding of Zionism in Czarist Russia, eighty-five years after Herzl wrote Der Judenstaat, thirty-three years after the establishment of the state of Israel, historical developments have called into question most of these articles of faith.

The opposition to their ideas that Herzl and other early Zionists encountered from the outset among nearly all orthodox Jews should have warned them that something was wrong. These religious Jews did not find their existence "a problem," as did Herzl and his freethinking colleagues, nor did they consider themselves "abnormal." They believed that they were in exile, in the sense of living in an unredeemed historical world awaiting the Messiah, much like fundamentalist Christians consider themselves to be living in a state of original sin awaiting the Second Coming. And when they went to Palestine, they went as religious pilgrims to a holy place, not as pioneers bent on founding a new nation. To the orthodox Jew, the worship of God exists for its own sake; it is a sacrilege to view it as a means to a secular end, even if that end is the preservation of a people.

Jews have a meaning only as servants of God, not as an ethnic group.

The Zionists were wrong. Religion was not a substitute for nationalism. Religion was positive, self-determined, unequivocal. Nationalism, however, was an anchor of identity for the Jew who had lost his religion. Nationalism was in some ways a Jewish reaction to rejection by the non-Jewish environment. It was a frustrated assimilation.

The issues raised in these long-ago debates have not been resolved by the passage of time. Rather, the Zionist
Copyright of Nation is the property of Nation Company, Inc. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.