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## **The 52 words that foretold the future of Israel's occupation in 1967**

**Two open letters, published the same day in the Israeli press, a mere three months after the Six-Day War, presented a fork in the road regarding the territories**

By Noam Sheizaf | May 26, 2017 | 7:54 PM | [1](#)

On Friday, September 22, 1967, two ads appearing in the local press augured a political debate that would rage in Israel for the next five decades. One of the paid-for letters to the public, published in the mass-circulation newspapers Yedioth Ahronoth and Maariv, was signed by 57 of the most important and best-known – then and now – of the country's writers, intellectuals and political activists. The moving spirit behind the ad was poet Natan Alterman, and the signatories came from the right and from Labor alike, among them the author S.Y. Agnon, the poets Uri Zvi Greenberg and Haim Gouri, and the ideologue Moshe Tabenkin.

The text itself reflected vividly the public mood after the Six-Day War. “The Land of Israel is now in the hands of the Jewish people,” the ad stated, “and just as we are not permitted to forgo the State of Israel, so too we are enjoined to sustain what we have received from it: the Land of Israel.” And, additionally, “We are hereby committed faithfully to the wholeness of our land, in regard to the Jewish people's past and to its future alike, and no government in Israel shall ever forgo this wholeness.”

That same day, completely by chance, another such open letter to the public, penned by two members of the far-left Matzpen organization, Haim Hanegbi and Shimon Tzabar, was published in Haaretz. Like the “Greater Land of Israel” petition, it, too, was a response to the discussion that had begun to emerge in the country about the future of the territories that had been conquered in the war. But its underlying concept was radically different.

“Our right to defend ourselves against annihilation does not grant us the right to oppress others,” the ad stated. “Conquest brings in its wake foreign rule. Foreign rule brings in its wake resistance. Resistance brings in its wake oppression. Oppression brings in its wake terrorism and counterterrorism. The victims of terrorism are usually innocent people. Holding onto the territories will turn us into a nation of murderers and murder victims.” And in large font at the end: “Let us leave the occupied territories now.”

The names of the 12 signatories of the ad meant absolutely nothing to the Israeli public. Historian Nitza Erel, who discusses the two ads in her 2010 book “Matzpen: Conscience and Fantasy” (Hebrew), notes that even the

famed public intellectual Yeshayahu Leibowitz, who was to become known for his anti-occupation stance, declined to sign the petition.

The title of Erel's book encapsulates the two traits that are regularly associated with the radical left: exaggerated moral sensitivity alongside a disconnect from reality. But the Matzpen letter is a pragmatic, straightforward text that is rooted in the post-Six-Day War situation. It barely touches on ideology, values or political nuances, and it avoids the hairsplitting, pandering and political correctness that characterize the present-day discussion of the occupation.

Fifty years later, one is struck by the text's precision and conciseness. Tens of thousands of op-eds, research studies and polemical pieces have been written in the ensuing decades about the question of the territories, but very few have been as lucid and direct as those 52 words (in Hebrew) – articulated just three months after the war, less than a year after the abolition of the Military Government over Israel's Palestinian citizens, and against the backdrop of the euphoria that then gripped the entire Jewish nation.

For fantasy and ideology, we need to turn back to the texts published in Yedioth and Maariv. The words about faithfulness to the land and to history evoke a mythic imperative to defend the “wholeness” of the land that cuts across the generations and transcends the authority of the public's elected representatives. The pro-settlement Gush Emunim movement, founded six-and-a-half years later, could have adopted the text word for word – were it not for the fact that the settlers themselves later accepted the government's authority to cede parts of the land, if not as part of the Oslo process then certainly when it came to the Katif bloc of settlements in the Gaza Strip. The only signatory of the letter appearing in Yedioth and Maariv who is still alive – Haim Gouri – long since came to regret the part he played in the Greater Israel movement: He termed his role in working out a compromise with the government at the Sebastia settlement site in 1975 “the folly of my life.”

The problem with the Greater Land of Israel letter lies not only in the unpalatable historical parallels that are engendered by talk about total faithfulness to land and to history, but in the way it ignores the presence of the Palestinians, of course. Five decades later, very little has changed. The Israeli government and its many hasbara (public diplomacy) agencies continue to espouse a revisionist concept of international law, according to which no recognized sovereignty existed in the territories before June 1967, and thus consequently Israel's hold on them cannot be categorized as “occupation.” But the concept of occupation in the Israeli context refers to the imposition of military rule over millions of people who are deprived of their rights, and not just to the control over the land. Because the right wing does

not have, never had and will never have a solution to this problem, its only recourse is to divert the discussion in other directions.

In the 50 years that have passed since the two ads were published, the occupation has become a national project that involves all branches of the state and the economy, from academe to the military industries, from the educational system to the institutions of culture and the arts. The status quo has morphed from being a situation into which Israel was plunged, partly by intention and partly by chance, into the sole legitimate plan of action. The reasons for this are not difficult to grasp. When all the resources and all the assets and all the power are in Israel's hands, every act of sharing with the Palestinians, whether in a two-state or one-state framework – appears to be an unnecessary waste and risk. The establishment of a Palestinian state would enmesh the Jewish public in Israel in a deep internal crisis without necessarily according it security, and the one-state solution offers an even foggier future.

The status quo may not be perfect – no one dreams of being an occupier – but it provides Israelis with relative prosperity and tranquility. Hence the addiction to the status quo of the entire political arena, whether it goes by the name of Labor leader Isaac Herzog's "Ten-Point Plan," Education Minister Naftali Bennett's "regularization," or Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's "no partner" mantra. The rise in racism is also related in large measure to the prolongation of the status quo, as Jewish society must justify to itself its statutory supremacy over the Palestinians.

So subversive in Israel is the simple idea that all residents need to be equally represented in the sovereign political system, that there are those who would like to ban it completely. This is also the reason that the crisis of liberalism in Israel is far graver than in the rest of the world: Those who should be in the forefront of the Israeli left today – the majority of the country's political and intellectual elite – are choosing to exit the game, or to join the right wing, or to adopt a cynical, fatalistic tone that doesn't aim to transfigure reality but only sees the world as a crazy, amusing circus. Intellectuals are always the first to understand which way the wind is blowing.

But fundamental problems that are not resolved do not necessarily fade away, even if the vast disparity in power between Jews and Palestinians makes it tempting to think otherwise. The Americans discovered this when they tried to sweep the slavery question under the carpet during the period they were gaining independence and were framing the Constitution; the Boers discovered it in South Africa; so did the French, who annexed Algeria and called it "homeland"; and so on and so forth.

Such analogies are taboo in the Israeli political arena not because of their imprecision – every take on history assumes from the outset that there are no

totally identical situations – but because of the desperate need among Israelis to bury their heads in the sand. A mood comparable to that of the person who falls from the 80th floor and shouts out as he passes the 30th floor that he's doing just fine and even enjoying the view and the fresh air.

How desperate we are for direct, simple formulations like that of the letter the Matzpen members wrote in 1967! An instant after the war, it was clear to the authors that occupation means above all rule over people. It's not by chance that in the past half-century, the territories have become an open-air prison. And that's no metaphor: The territories resemble a prison, with their ubiquitous walls, watchtowers and security cameras, and stringent laws about furloughs and visits. Millions of people are being held as prisoners of the State of Israel, only because we are afraid to pay the price of their liberation – though it's a price that must inevitably be paid, of course.

“Conquest brings in its wake foreign rule. Foreign rule brings in its wake resistance. Resistance brings in its wake oppression. Oppression brings in its wake terrorism and counterterrorism... Holding onto the territories will turn us into a nation of murderers and murder victims.” Unpleasant words. And yet, all the wars waged by Israel since Operation Litani in Lebanon (1978) – and their frequency has increased over the years – were against the Palestinians. Their purpose: to preserve the status quo. Even the one exception, the Second Lebanon War (2006), was in large measure a leftover from an earlier war in that country, in 1982, which was aimed at distancing the Palestine Liberation Organization from Israel. Since then, the PLO and the Palestinians have come to terms, belatedly and with teeth gritted, with the fact of Israel's existence.

We remain captives of the occupation, and of the bizarre rules we have forced on ourselves in talking about it.

Matzpen was the first to feel the brunt of the approach that is now reserved in the Israeli dialogue for those who are engaged on a practical, daily basis in resisting the occupation. Its members were struck and cursed when they tried to distribute copies of the Haaretz letter on the streets and at political gatherings. The revelation that two of the members of an Arab-Jewish sabotage ring arrested in 1972 were former Matzpen activists sealed the organization's historical image for all time.

In contrast, the signers of the Greater Israel ad were the elite of the elite, and there's no doubt that the messianic manifesto they published was a faithful reflection of the public consensus. This bombastic text collapsed under reality itself within a decade, when the government of Israel – and a proud, right-wing government, at that – easily gave up a territory twice the size of the rest of the State of Israel, though the consensus remained intact.

The lesson is that the numerical relations between the mainstream and the fringes reflect many things, but ownership of the truth or of logic is not necessarily one of them. Let us leave the occupied territories now.