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Sefirah Study

Portraits of the Holy Land: Antiquity to the Present
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Week 6 – Conclusion
Zion in the Mind of American Jews:
The Image and Reality of Zionist Work in Palestine
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It should be stated at the outset that propaganda/publicity campaigns are rarely successful at manufacturing consent. Indeed, the most effective propaganda is that which resonates with an already accepted idea, or in which the intended audience is pre-disposed to be interested in, or believe the message being broadcast. Zionist propaganda/publicity benefited from a generation of Jews exposed to the affects of discrimination, pogroms, and expulsions that filled the papers, or are a part of their family history. Thus the concept of the Land of Israel as both a haven for Jews, and as a rebuilt Jewish commonwealth, found fertile ground.

There is also a fascinating irony in the history of Zionist propaganda. By the 1920s and 30s the main source of Zionist funds, and thus the intended audience of the message, were urbanized west European and American Jews, who were contributing to what was billed as an agrarian revival in the land of Israel. Although some of this was based on an appeal to the exotic—what some scholars call “Orientalism”—by and large the campaign seemed to resonate among many Americans Jews because they represented an admixture of a traditional Jewish obligation for Tzedakah, with an appeal to help Jewish immigrants to Palestine achieve self-reliance.

When I consider the first document, “Keller’s Map of Palestine (1910), it seems likely that the intended audience was an acculturated American Jewish public, many of whose parents were Yiddish speaking immigrants from Eastern Europe, thus the use of the map from 1910. The photos on the obverse side, with captions in English, were divided between images of kibbutz and urban landscapes, reflecting the interests of the intended audience in what the Zionist leader Louis Brandeis (and others) called the “Upbuilding of Palestine.”

The borders of this map demonstrate how important it is to not read contemporary history backwards into the early twentieth century, nor be too confident as to what long range plans Zionist leaders had. Early Zionist geography, that is to say their sense of the boundaries of the Land of Israel, were not fixed, nor was their a consensus as to what those boundaries should be. In this case the maps reflects the biblical concepts of the promised land, rather than a specific

Zionist ideology. In any case, the eventual borders of the State of Israel were set after 1948 by politics, diplomacy, and war, rather than coherent planning.

One of the challenges facing the Jewish National Fund was not only to publicize its activities, but to find a way to make Diaspora Jewry feel that it was vested in the Zionist enterprise, that is to say that they were in a sense "part-owners," or at least stake-holders, of the land. JNF certificates, such as the one issued to Sophie Tucker, provided a physical link, albeit in a piece of paper, that any Jew, even one living in the United States who had no intention of moving to Israel, could participate in the upbuilding of the land. The reforestation campaign, symbolized by the inclusion of trees, was one of the most successful Zionist publicity movements. These certificates were often given as gifts to people such as Sophie Tucker (an actress known as "the last of the Red Hot Mama's") for her support of Zionist activities. Many of us can relate to such certificates as they have a number of modern parallels. As a child in Hebrew school I vividly remember a JNF fund drive, where I donated funds to plant a tree in honor of my paternal grandfather (who I never met). For this donation I received a certificate, along with a book of stamps commemorating prominent Zionist leaders.

The illustration from the cover of the United Palestine Appeal 1937 Yearbook on the Occasion of the "Night of Stars" once again provides an interesting example of how the agrarian imagery of Zionist propaganda was packaged to an American Jewish audience. It was common to show Zionists pioneers as young men and women, and in this case they are linked with a biblical looking figure and a prophetic quotation. The image makes it seem as if the aged figure is speaking directly to the Halutzim, charging them with this critical task. It is, I believe, one of the most effective images to come out of the pre-1939 era.

Despite all the propaganda imagery the actual process of the upbuilding of Palestine, and later Israel, required detailed planning by technocrats, something we often forget. In this context the archival record plays an important role in recreating the practical efforts towards building a Jewish homeland. Benjamin V. Cohen was one of Louis Brandeis's disciples. The Brandeis group tended to have a more Americanized vision of the Zionist enterprise, in which the creation of an infrastructure that would ensure self-sufficiency was a primary goal. This 1919 proposal to build an electrical plant on Mount Meron must be understood as part of the process of creating this infrastructure. When juxtaposed with the previous images, it helps bridge the gap between image and reality, and reminds the student of history of the daunting nature of the enterprise.