**Introduction**

The Israeli Declaration of Independence states that “We extend our hand to all neighbouring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighbourliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land. The State of Israel is prepared to do its share in a common effort for the advancement of the entire Middle East.” The call for peace was not a mere flowery phrase dictated by the historic occasion of the declaration. For comparison, the American Declaration of Independence, from which Israel’s founding fathers drew inspiration, does not refer to a desire for peace.

Whether the generations of Israel’s leaders indeed extended their hands in peace, is, of

course, disputed. But the very reference in the Declaration of Independence to a need for sound neighborly relations indicates that the founders well understood that the Zionist project would not be complete as long as Israel is not integrated in the Middle Eastern environment.

Seventy years after the Declaration of Independence, although the diplomatic issue has remained at the center of Israel’s political and public agenda for the duration of its existence, the goal has not yet been achieved.

One of the significant attempts to achieve peace was revealed, as is well known, on September 13, 1993, when the left-wing government headed by Yitzhak Rabin signed a diplomatic agreement with the Palestine Liberation Organization, which represented the Palestinian national movement. The “Oslo Accord,” as the declaration of principles signed by the two sides was called, sought, at its core, to establish a Palestinian autonomy for five years in most of the territories captured by Israel in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the course of the Six-Day War, in preparation for talks on a permanent agreement. The agreement also paved the way to the second peace accord Israel signed with an Arab nation—Jordan, in October 1994.

One can’t overstate the importance of the Oslo Accord—it was a historic breakthrough in relations between the two national movements fighting each other for sovereignty in the Land of Israel/Palestine since the start of the twentieth century. The reconciliation with the Palestinians was supposed to be greater than the sum of its parts, and to reap results in Israel’s relations with Arab countries in the future. Both Shimon Peres’s “New Middle East” and Rabin’s more measured strategy, which sought to take advantage of the “window of opportunity” that opened with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, promised a new future at the start of the 1990s. On September 23, 1993, when the Knesset authorized the Oslo Accord, even two figures then considered to be the future leaders of the Likud—Roni Milo, who was born to a Revisionist family, and Meir Shitrit, who represented the Revisionists of the new Mizrahi generation—did not oppose the agreement, in order to be on the right side of history. The newspapers wrote that the dream of the Greater Land of Israel had faded.

In 2017, a quarter century later, the situation has changed completely. Since 2001, right-wing governments have led Israel, and the Labor Party at times has even joined the right-wing governing coalition as a secondary member. The right’s dominance is so powerful that today there are some prominent Likud Knesset members who do not hesitate to suggest a Jewish state in all of the land west of the Jordan, without full citizenship for Palestinians. It goes without saying that the fading of the peace process and the rise of the right-wing camp have many complicated reasons. But this paper, based on, among other things, original and exclusive access to the personal archive of the architect of the Oslo Accords, who served at its inception as the deputy foreign minister, Yossi Beilin,[[1]](#endnote-1) will focus mainly on those reasons related to the character and shape of the peace process as led by the Left as an explanation of its collapse.

**Interim: A Deal or Reconciliation?**

Since the signing of the Oslo Accords’ Declaration of Principles and until the year 2000, the Israeli Defense Forces retreated from the majority of the territories, and the Palestinian Authority was indeed established. But the attempt to reach a permanent arrangement, the main goal of the accords, did not succeed. This had many reasons: that the creation of the Palestinian Authority did not prevent attacks on Israelis weakened the support and faith of the Israeli public in the arrangement. Rabin’s assassination two years after the signing of the Oslo Accord also hurt the process. Rabin’s successor, Shimon Peres, lost the election held following the assassination, in May 1996, to Benjamin Netanyahu of the Likud, who was skeptical of the process and slowed and encumbered its progress. Of course, from the Palestinian standpoint, that five years passed and no state was established, and the IDF continued to deploy even in territories from which it retreated, intensified their suspicion of Israel.

Only in July 2000, a year after Ehud Barak of the Labor Party was elected prime minister, did representatives of Israel and the Palestinians attempt to reach a permanent agreement in the framework the Camp David Summit, held in the United States. But even though at the summit the two sides agreed in principle to establish a Palestinian state, as opposed to the Oslo Accords, which did not explicitly mention this option, the talks failed and exposed insoluble differences of opinion on a variety of issues. One of them, actually not the central issue, was the size of the potential state of Palestine. Israel began the talks by presenting a map of a Palestinian state that made up 77 percent of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. By the end of the talks the Israelis already presented a map that ranged around 90 percent—and the Palestinians rejected it. In the Taba talks, which took place in January 2001, after the failure of the Camp David Summit, the Israelis presented a map that offered 93–94 percent of the territories, but the Palestinians were willing to compromise only on a map that would promise them 98 percent of the territories, in addition to compensation in lands transferred to them from Israeli territories in exchange for the 2 percent of West Bank territory that they had agreed to give up (Tzanani 2015, 67–68).

With the Second Intifada, which broke out in October 2000, a few months after the failure of the summit, came the phenomenon of suicide attacks by Palestinians. The majority of Israelis considered the attacks a display of ingratitude and proof that the Palestinians are not prepared to make peace, since, so it seemed, chronologically the intifada broke out after Israel agreed to a Palestinian state. On the other hand, aggressive military responses on the part of Israel, at the height of which the IDF conducted Operation Defensive Shield in March 2002, returning to the heart of West Bank cities and villages, convinced the Palestinians that Israel was and still is an occupying force that would not hesitate to use its military might to retake Palestinian territories.

The IDF’s actions against the Palestinian Authority, the failure of the PLO to prevent attacks against Israelis, the disappointment of the Palestinian public when the autonomy did not develop into an independent state and incidents of corruption spread, were all factors that weakened the status of the PLO in the territories and contributed to the victory of Hamas in the election to the legislative branch of the authority in 2006. A year later, in 2007, Hamas forcibly took over the Gaza Strip (after Israel unilaterally withdrew from Gaza in 2005). Since then the West Bank has been disconnected from the Gaza Strip. Adding to these, the significant growth in the settlements (at the time of the signing of the Oslo Accords, in 1993, 100,000 settlers lived in the West Bank and Gaza Strip; a decade later 350,000 settlers lived in the territories),[[2]](#endnote-2) further eroded the allure of the key formula of the Oslo Accords, the division of the land. In the eyes of many today the model of two states has lost its validity (Susser 2011, 213–15).

Why did the process collapse? Asher Susser represents many scholars in his argument that the very attempt to achieve a permanent solution that would bring “the end of the conflict”—as was attempted at the Camp David Summit in 2000—was what destroyed it (Ibid., 213–30).[[3]](#endnote-3) According to Susser, the Oslo Accord was actually wise in its goal of a gradual arrangement. That is because the Israeli goal of a permanent agreement that would include “the end of Palestinian demands from Israel”—without granting the right of return, without Palestinian sovereignty in Jerusalem and in holy places, but with the recognition of Israel as a Jewish state—would never be accepted by the Palestinians. The reason is that under these conditions they would be asked to give up not only their concrete diplomatic demands, but also the principles of their faith—that define their national identity—regarding their right to the land and the wrong done to them by the Zionist movement with the events of expulsion and escape of 1948.

According to this argument, Israelis should give up the dream of ending the conflict completely and make do with arrangements that would allow differences of opinion in a de facto reality of coexistence. Moreover: anyone who seeks “the end of the conflict” in this generation would encounter disappointment that would lead to a search for new and dangerous diplomatic frameworks, among them one state for all citizens, which would entail none other than the rejection of the Jewish right to self-definition and would lead to civil war, or an apartheid state, which would end the democratic aspect of Israel. That is, Israel should push for a nonpermanent arrangement of two states, even if the Palestinians won’t in exchange commit to conceding on additional demands in the future.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Was the goal of bringing a full end to the conflict, which stood behind the Oslo Accord and was tested by the Barak government, actually “hurrying the messiah”? Should we conclude that just as the talmudic sages instructed Jews to refrain from attempting to realize their aspiration to return to the land of Israel as long as God didn’t provide the right conditions to do so, so must we recognize that in the next few generations, and even more distant generations, the conflict is unsolvable at its basis? On the other hand, could it be that mistakes made in the course of the Oslo process, and the particular world view of its leaders, were what precipitated the current situation?

The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek humorously suggested considering the seemingly intractable conflict given an apocalyptic announcement that a meteor is about to fall on the region: would Israelis and Palestinians both realize at that moment that the conflict is not so profound and complicated and that its features are even ridiculous? Would they not cooperate in order to save themselves and to save their common homeland? But on second thought, it’s doubtful that Žižek’s suggestion serves its purpose: its hypothetical question doesn’t weigh a consideration that received little attention from the framers of the Oslo process and their successors—the religious consideration. That is, yes, it may indeed be that even with the knowledge that a meteor is about to destroy the land, with its holy sites and residents, Jews and Muslims would entrench themselves in their particularist demands on the land, before their ascent to heaven . . .

And indeed, an analysis of the diplomatic process and its collapse demonstrates that religion played and still plays an enormous role, which was not taken into consideration by the leaders of the process.

**Interim: The Liberal Trap**

The diplomatic process Israel and the PLO conducted stemmed from the optimistic paradigm of “liberal peace.” At the basis of this world view is the assumption that peace could be attained by functional means, that is, a formula could be found to divide the land and achieve acceptable security arrangements, while skipping over the religious, historical, cultural, and identity aspects that influence the conflict. Peace as a profitable real estate deal. The liberal paradigm of the peace process assumes that the freer, more secular, and more advanced governments and economies would be, the more they would prefer to refrain from a situation of war (Menochal and Kilpatrick 2005, 768). And indeed, the Palestinian Authority was meant not only to serve as the infrastructure for a state, but also as a secular alternative, with a liberal economy, to the “threat” of the religious agenda of Hamas and its ilk (since the 1980s) taking control of Palestinian society. At the same time, devotees of the Oslo Accords in Israel wished to influence the character of Israeli society by means of the agreement as well, and to shape it as a Western, secular, and liberal state before it’s shaped by conservative, religious, and even Mizrahi agendas.

Devotees of liberal peace see adherence to religious principles and values as a retreat to the archaic past, and offer instead an optimistic promise of cooperation that would raise the standard of living for the two peoples and would guarantee a reality of peace. This view is anchored in the idea of “progress,” as it has been formulated in Western philosophy since the Enlightenment, according to which human society moves forward in a linear fashion, thanks, among other things, to science and rationalism, toward a better future.

Although the idea of “progress” sounds promising, it’s not necessarily accepted by everyone, and conflicts with conceptual alternatives to understanding history: for instance, the alternative of “that which has been is all that shall be” from Ecclesiastes, which sees history as moving in circles, or even the view of history as a process of retreat, as expressed in the saying, “the decline of the generations.” The clash between these various world views was clearly seen in the conflict that occurred on July 24, 2000, during the Camp David Summit, between President Bill Clinton, a devotee of the idea of progress, and Arafat.[[5]](#endnote-5) The dispute, which will be quoted at length below, is instructive evidence for the way that different and opposing patterns of viewing history—viewpoints that we could define as Western vs. Eastern, rational vs. mythological, or secular vs. traditional—played a central role in the failure of the attempt to achieve a permanent arrangement.

“Why didn’t you accept my offers?” Clinton angrily asked Arafat, after he justified Barak’s refusal to give up Israeli sovereignty over the Temple Mount.

Barak offered compromises and concessions, and you refuse to offer anything […] the discussion here is about diplomacy, not religion. You couldn’t dream of sovereignty over the Muslim and Christian quarters and complete authority over the Haram [meaning Haram al-Sharif, the Arabic name for the Temple Mount], and all of it in the framework of a sovereign state. You couldn’t dream of it! You missed an opportunity in ’47, when you opposed partition […] and now again?! You won’t have a state. Relations between us are over. Congress will vote to end aid and we’ll treat you like a terrorist organization. You won’t find anyone in the Middle East who would look at you. You would get the support of the churches—you brought them all to Bethlehem 2000—and you would return a hero to Gaza. But the morning after you’ll be alone and withhold from your people everything that’s offered to it. Then your people will judge you. And the Muslims too would say that Clinton offered you a state and control on the Haram […] you will be the reason that the Haram will stay under Israeli sovereignty. Barak made many concessions—and you haven’t moved. You only want to keep what Barak already gave you in your pocket. (Erekat journal)

Clinton tried, then, to convince Arafat to make do with partial control of the Temple Mount—which would stay under Israeli sovereignty—out of a rational assumption, according to which it’s better for Arafat to agree to receive more than what he has in hand now. But Arafat responded from a different perspective:

[…] I’m the leader of the Palestinian people and I represent the Arabs, Muslim and Christian, in all that relates to the Haram and the Holy Sepulchre. I won’t betray their trust in me. Even if you offer me a state, and Haifa, and Jaffa—without sovereignty over the Haram it won’t happen! Time will tell […] I won’t betray my people. Do you want to come to my funeral? I prefer to die than to agree to transfer sovereignty over the Haram to Israel. I won’t also sell out the Armenians, who are part of the Palestinian people. I won’t be written in Arab and Muslim history as a traitor. As I promised my people—we will liberate Jerusalem! If not now, maybe in a thousand years. (Erekat journal)

The conflict between the president and the chairman revealed vast differences in the way they viewed time, the meaning of their role in history, and their approach to the complex relationship between religion and nationality. While Clinton pointed to the immediate benefit expected for Palestinians, Arafat emphasized that he’s ready to wait another thousand years to fully achieve what he seeks. While Clinton treated Arafat like a leader of an organization with a secular position that calculates the profit and loss of various possibilities, Arafat insisted that while he heads a secular organization, it represents a community of believers that crosses boundaries of nationality. Thus Arafat viewed himself not only as representing Palestinian interests, but as representing the non-Jewish attachment to the holy sites. That’s the reason for the paradox in his refusal of Israel’s offer: to a great extent it was easier for him to leave the Temple Mount under Israeli sovereignty and to claim his rights to it, that is, to freeze the existing situation, than to compromise with Israel and achieve partial sovereignty, since in doing so he would be seen as the first Muslim leader to recognize the de jure right of Jews to the Temple Mount.

Thus, while Clinton’s approach offered optimism in the short term, Arafat’s gaze looked beyond visible time—to the distant past, and to history to be written in the distant future. In his world view, the mythological, the theological, and the rational dwelt together. But what’s more surprising is that the position of Ehud Barak, who was considered to have an “analytical brain,” was revealed to contain similar elements. If it were not so, how could we understand Barak’s, the secularized kibbutznik’s, declaration at the end of the Camp David Summit, that he refused to concede sovereignty over the Temple Mount because that would mean conceding the “holy of holies” (Dayan 2012), a theological concept that refers to a specific spot within the temple, where the ark of the covenant stood and within it the tablets with the Ten Commandment, according to Jewish tradition?

Of course, the question is not whether Ehud Barak believed it, but why he used this terminology at the decisive moment. The answer is that the religious dimension played a key role in the process, even when it was led by secular people. Nonetheless the liberal paradigm that stood at the basis of the process sought to ignore it.

**Interim: Flourishing Nationalism**

When Clinton summed up the failure of the peace process in his memoir, he determined that “if Arafat refused my offer, he won’t accept any offer” (Clinton 2005, 939). Both Barak and Clinton laid the blame on Arafat, and even if justified, this put the chairman of the Palestinian Authority in a position of diplomatic inferiority, which played a role in his inclination to make use of the violent intifada, which broke out in the territories less than three months after the failure of the Camp David Summit, in order to release the diplomatic pressure placed on him.

Here we should point to another dominant factor that burdened the peace process: it was conducted under an American umbrella. The Americans, at least since 1967, have been close allies of Israel, and their approach to nationalism, for cultural reasons, stems from a position of “winning/flourishing nationalism,” that is, a position that “celebrates the positive and the successful and that has little sympathy for a nationalism whose leaders dwell on wrongs and injustice, and whose main experience is based on humiliations and defeats” (Pei 2003, 35). The starting position of the Palestinians thus had little chance from the outset of winning American favor. This is because as a result of the circumstances of the development of Palestinian nationalism, in the shadow of Zionism and European imperialism that followed the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, it indeed formed with a sense of dispossession and exploitation (Khalidi 1997, 171–90). The American position has, therefore, from the start, less tolerance for the Palestinians’ claims of mistreatment. Thus the American involvement in the conflict was also a burden on the Palestinian position, and from the perspectives of supporters of reconciliation, a weight on the process of building peace in general.

Another example of the basic differences between the Western/liberal perspective on the peace process and the Palestinians’ position is found in Beilin’s description of his first meeting with Arafat, which was held at Arafat’s headquarters in Tunis, a short time after the signing of Oslo’s statement of principles in September 1993.

At the meeting Arafat asked Beilin to help him convince Rabin to free Ahmed Yassin, the leader of Hamas in the territories, who was then in an Israeli jail. Arafat wanted to prove to Hamas supporters how powerful his influence was on Israel as a result of the agreement he reached, and at the same time to show that he’s the leader of all Palestinians and thus bolster his standing in the territories. Beilin, on his part, asked Arafat to stop wearing military uniforms in his contacts with the Israelis in order to convince the Israeli public that he has peaceful intentions. Arafat responded to Beilin’s suggestion in way that isn’t customary in dialogues between Western leaders: a prolonged silence. The silence was broken only when Hanan Ashrawi, who was the spokeswoman of the Palestinian delegation to the talks in Washington and attended the meeting, took the initiative and responded to Beilin that Arafat dresses in the way his people understand him. Without the uniform he would be a different person in their eyes (Beilin 2001, 170).

The political thinker Frantz Fanon wrote of Fidel Castro, who also wore military uniforms on his visits to the United Nations, that what angers the West is that in his dress Castro demonstrates “his awareness of the continuation of the rule of violence,” but that on his part, Castro wore a uniform in order to express his willingness to defend himself from what he understood as the West’s violence toward him (Fanon 2006, 80). In the same way, Arafat continued to wear a uniform not only to threaten the renewal of violence if the process fails (and he certainly intended to threaten so), but also in order to say that in his historical perspective he is still threatened by Israel, which is stronger than him. For Arafat, wearing a military uniform was meant to emphasize that the Western-Zionist-imperialist wrong has not been restituted, and that he does not intend to submit to it. Whether we choose to adopt Arafat’s narrative or whether we reject it, Beilin’s very demand of Arafat, a demand that seemed acceptable to most Israeli supporters of peace, to change from a uniform to civilian dress, was like demanding to forcibly empty him of his nationalist and historical sensibilities.

The description of these anecdotes is not meant to say who was right—only to point to the fact that the gap between the Israelis and Palestinians does not solely amount to a dispute over borders. It’s much deeper.

**Interim: The Religious Dimension: Or the Return of the Repressed**

In his study, Michael Barnett wrote that after Rabin won the 1992 election and became prime minister, he adopted the Oslo route and negotiations with the PLO, recanting on his previous position of seeking to hold talks with representatives of the Palestinians in the territories, mostly because he recognized that a window of opportunity opened in the Middle East with the collapse of the Soviet Union (Barnett 1999, 19–21). Indeed, the strategic circumstances that enabled the negotiations with the PLO were connected to the fall of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, which left the Middle East under the influence of only one world power, more friendly to Israel; the First Gulf War, which started in January 1991, when the United States deployed to defend one Arab country (Kuwait) against another Arab country (Iraq) with the support of most Sunni states, which sought a closer relationship with the United States, and were therefore ready to be flexible in their position toward Israel; and the mistake Arafat made when he chose to support Saddam Hussein before the war, and thus weakened his diplomatic standing upon Iraq’s defeat. At the same time, the PLO had to deal with two key threats to its power in the territories as well: a local Palestinian leadership, which started to develop in the territories during the First Intifada, and the growing strength of Hamas. These factors caused Arafat and the senior leadership of his organization, once Rabin replaced the Shamir government in June 1992, to soften their positions toward Israel and to offer direct negotiations.

The leanings of the Israeli pubic, which was tired of the conflict and the diplomatic stagnation during the years of the unity government and Shamir’s rule, also influenced the Israeli leadership’s readiness for a groundbreaking move. In 1992 the First Intifada had already abated as a popular uprising in the territories, but attacks grew by individual terrorists who came from the territories and infiltrated Israel, often armed with knives. Paradoxically, perhaps as a result of the beginning of the era of the policies of privatization and neoliberalism, which engendered individualization in Israeli society and widened social gaps (Gutwein 2001)—which were relatively small until the 1980s—it became clear that Israelis were prepared to fight when it came to a general threat to the nation, as was the case during the intifada, but when the threat became “privatized” to a personal danger from the knife of a random terrorist, most Israelis were sick of the situation and preferred compromise.

Rabin estimated that with no possibility of advancing in talks with representatives of the Palestinians in the territories without the direct involvement of the PLO, it would be best to recognize the PLO at that moment. From a strategic standpoint there wouldn’t be a better opportunity for a compromise with the Palestinians and Arab nations than at a time when their Soviet backing vanished, and the PLO’s status was diminished after it supported the defeated regime of Saddam Hussein during the First Gulf War. Thus, Rabin’s outlook was tied to global developments, and free of religious influence.

His rival in the 1992 election was the leader of the Likud, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, whose world view was apparently also undeniably secular.[[6]](#endnote-6) Like Rabin, Shamir also recognized the strategic significance of the United States’ emergence as the single world power influencing the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union. But he refused to connect the changes in the global map to Israel’s stance, and insisted on the necessity of controlling the territories and abstaining from any negotiation with the PLO. Shamir was, as I noted, alienated from Jewish religious observance in his personal life, but in his refusal to adjust his diplomatic stance in response to strategic changes, he embodied, unknowingly, a theological perspective that holds that the Jews face a constant threat, regardless of concrete historical circumstances. With this background we can understand his famous statement that “the sea is the same sea and the Arabs are the same Arabs,” that is, the reincarnation of the same enemies of Israel of the entire history of the Jews.

In retrospect, Rabin’s victory over Shamir in the 1992 election was the last clear political victory of the secular stance over the religious.

In order to understand the significance of the religious dimension in a diplomatic process conducted by secular people, I adopt a more complicated means of apprehending the relationship between religion and secularism here—a position that casts doubt on the “theory of secularization” common in Western scholarship until the 1960s. According to the theory of secularization, with the modern era began an evolutionary process of the waning of the religious world, its concepts and institutions, toward the development and expansion of the secular experience (Casanova 1994). But today it’s clear that not only has the power of religion in the world not waned, the very dichotomy between the religious and secular worlds is largely blurred. The school of thought of the “critique of secularization” has pointed to religious phenomena, both old or new, that exist and are growing in the midst of the modern era, with its cultural, economic, and technological contexts, and even draw from them. Thus, for example, ISIS is a religious phenomenon that seeks to return to the early Islamic past, but at the same time it’s also a modern and secular phenomenon in the use it makes of technology, and in its ambition to change the national system in the Middle East by means of human actions. Hence, at the core of the secular Yitzhak Shamir’s view of Israel’s relations with the Arabs was actually a deterministic stance, which can only be understood as a religious perspective that ignores historical and strategic developments—yet another example of the difficulty in separating a religious and a secular stance.

My intention isn’t merely to reject the paradigm that distinguishes between and even contrasts religion and secularism, or religious and national phenomena (Kedourie 1993, 74–79). These arguments, which present the phenomenon of nationalism as a secularized and renewed expression of the religious essence of the ancient world (and thus nationalism has replaced religion, but is similar to it in its particularistic values), are rather familiar. My intention is to argue, as Talal Assad explained in his book *The Rise of Secularism*, that the religious world was also not a unitary and consistent phenomenon, but contained secular elements, such as (as actually seen in the Bible’s stories of the patriarchs) arguments and conflicts between man and God, in a way that anthropomorphizes God and in effect negates his uniquely transcendent character.

On the other hand, just as the liberal idea of the equality of all people at its core draws from the monotheistic idea that assumes one God for all humanity (Mendes-Flohr 2010, 55), so secularism itself does not necessarily stand in contradiction to the religious world, but “is fed from the theological and holds all sorts of dialogues with it” (Fisher 2016, 23). The distinction between a religious and secular person requires, thus, a more nuanced and complex perspective that recognizes the connections between the two.

But it seems that the leaders of the diplomatic process from the Western side—that is, Israel and the United States—did not recognize this complexity. Thus Clinton yelled at Arafat during the Camp David Summit “the discussion [here] is about diplomacy, not religion” (Erekat journal). The Israelis and Americans demanded that Arafat separate the religious and practical, that is, the secular. Their position was invested in the false secularization theory that saw the religious world as an archaic phenomenon that is bound to pass from the world as we progress to a future ruled by science and reason. And their refusal to recognize phenomena that the secularization critique effectively describes contributed to the weakening of the possibility of bringing both sides involved closer in the negotiations.

**Between Sharet and Ben-Gurion**

In the state’s formative years two schools of Israeli foreign policy developed, one led by its first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, and one led by its first foreign minister and second prime minister, Moshe Sharet.

In his experience in the days of the Yishuv, when he headed the diplomatic department of the Jewish Agency, Sharet got to know Palestinian and Arab leaders; just after the victory in the War of Independence he already called to consider the “psychological hit” the Arabs and Palestinians suffered in their defeat, in order to integrate Israel into the Middle East by means of agreement. He believed that it is because Israel won that it must adopt a stance that is moderate, conciliatory, and most of all considerate toward the natural ambitions of the Palestinians and Arabs, in order to lessen the hatred toward Israel, and he even considered a possibility of establishing a Palestinian state (Shefer 2014, 189). Ben-Gurion, on the other hand, though he declared his readiness for compromise and his belief in the value of peace, in actuality laid the groundwork for “security activism” in Israel, with the development of its military might and the policy of deterrence, after he concluded that in any case the time is not right for the Arabs to reconcile with Israel. Ben-Gurion decisively determined that Sharet does not have, “the strength of spirit, foresight, and a real understanding of complicated diplomatic situations.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

The sharp manner in which Sharet expressed the diplomatic difference with Ben-Gurion is presented here at length, also for the relevance of these words for today:

One approach [the “securitist”] says that the Arabs understand only the language of force […] Israel must, occasionally, prove that it is strong […], if it doesn’t prove it, they would destroy it […,] As for the issue of peace—says this approach—… if peace comes, it would come only if they are convinced, that it’s not possible to defeat this state […] The second approach says that the issue of peace must not fade from our calculation for a moment. This is not only a diplomatic calculation: in the long term it’s a decisive security calculation […] We were so imbued with the recognition of our historical justification, that we didn’t think of the relatively of our justification from the perspective of the other side. And we failed in our psychological understanding of the problem, since we didn’t give enough thought to the depth of the national consciousness and sensibility of the Arab world.[[8]](#endnote-8)

What is interesting in Sharet’s position is his early recognition of the psychological power of the Nakba. Decades would pass, in wake of the collapse of the diplomatic process at the beginning of the twenty-first century, until scholars would know to identify that indeed, there, in the days of the Nakba of 1948, is where the sting of the conflict is located for the Palestinians. It’s a key reason that the liberal paradigm, which sought to divide the land and arrive at an arrangement on the basis of what had occurred since 1967, is not able to resolve the conflict (Shenhav 2010; Omer 2013).

Here we should note that it’s no coincidence that the Oslo process was led by two protégés of Ben-Gurion, from the political establishment and the military, Peres and Rabin, and that Beilin also defines himself as a “Ben-Gurionite.”[[9]](#endnote-9) He’s not the successor of Sharet, and certainly not of those few Zionists—among them Asher Ginzberg (Ahad Ha-am), the educator Yitzhak Epstein,[[10]](#endnote-10) and the Brit Shalom group—who sought at the early stages of the national enterprise to turn the gaze to the question of the connection to and relations with the Palestinians, including on the cultural, psychological, and moral planes.

For Beilin, and certainly for Peres and Rabin, the need for peace was first and foremost a clear diplomatic and security interest for Israel. The main argument for Israel’s readiness to talk with the PLO—which in a gradual process moderated its positions since 1988, adopted the formula of two states and recognized Israel’s right to exist—was based on the estimation that following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Gulf War the organization was at a low point and that Israel should take advantage of the situation.

Immediately after the agreement of principles was reached between the PLO and Israel in Oslo, Foreign Minister Peres flew to the United States in order to brief the American administration. In the meeting (whose participants included the administration’s envoy to the Middle East, Dennis Ross, Israel’s then-ambassador to the United States, Itamar Rabinowitz, and the Norwegian foreign minister Johan Holst) the Americans sounded supportive, but slightly wary of counting on the PLO. Peres justified Oslo in that “we caught the PLO at a low point,” and immediately added, “but we should be careful of pressure that would cause the partner to crack.”

Warren Christopher agreed, “Right. You should make sure you maintain a reliable interlocutor.”

At this point it seems that Peres and Christopher understood well the necessity of carefully balancing between taking advantage of the PLO’s weakness and compromising with it so that its weakness won’t lead it to break and disrupt the process. But when Ross asked to know Israel’s estimate of the chance that Arafat won’t keep his word and won’t implement the agreement, Peres confidently stated:

“Our estimation is positive. He has no choice given his strategic situation.”[[11]](#endnote-11) The appraisal that Arafat had “no choice” in retrospect turns out to be one of the causes for the failure of the process. It blinded Israel to the needs and sensitivities of the Palestinians, and left Arafat the option of violence.

The Israelis did not think of the peace process as an attempt to resolve deep narrative differences touching on historical justice, but as a practical and pragmatic solution that can be achieved in the present moment, when the PLO is weak. From the documents contained in the Beilin archive it emerges that Peres and Rabin didn’t have a single discussion on the ultimate goal toward which they strive. They didn’t discuss in depth the meaning of reconciliation, the possibilities for realizing it, and its implications for the two sides.

The Palestinians, on their part, saw the willingness to reach a practical and pragmatic solution as only one step towards a permanent arrangement, in which justice would be rendered to them. The gap between the two viewpoints was exposed to its full extent at the Camp David Summit in 2000. When Shlomo Ben Ami, the foreign minister and minister of internal security at the end of Barak’s term (foreign affairs and internal security; a strange combination, which exemplifies Barak’s shrewd approach to the peace process), summed up the failure of the summit, he argued that the main problem was that the Palestinians came to “seek justice” more than a solution. But the two can’t be detached, since the psychological and actual significance of doing justice is a critical part of the Palestinian understanding of the way to a solution. Since the 1920s they have rejected various diplomatic solutions offered to them to solve the conflict with Zionism not because they were blind to the possibilities, but because from their perspective, the root of the conflict lies in the essential wrong done to them, in the very realization of the Jews’ ambition of independence in what has been their own homeland for the past hundreds of years. Thus, for them, the conflict stems from injustice. One can accept their position or dispute it, but in retrospect it makes sense to wonder if it was possible to allay more than a hundred years of historical hostility by means of a realpolitik approach that seeks to take advantage of the other side’s weakness, and offers to solve the conflict through a functional division of the territory, without contending with essential issues in the conflict between the two national movements, including the recognition of wrongs and sensitivities that are seemingly not “rational.”

The research of Brigadier-General Ephraim Lavie, the army intelligence branch’s representative to the Israeli delegation at Camp David, determined, among other things, that “the Oslo process failed because the decisions of the two sides to resolve the conflict by means of peace were not whole and were not fundamental and strategic. In other words: the two sides saw the negotiation process as tactical cover—just to win time and to gain international admiration—an alibi that would later enable more comfortable solutions for each of the two sides” (Lavie and Fishman 2010, 364).

Indeed, Oslo’s breakthrough was mainly on the symbolic plane—the willingness to shake hands with someone considered the intransigent enemy of the Zionist movement and Israel. Oslo was a successful agreement in the beginning because the Israelis and Palestinians skipped over all the critical core issues, and left them for later. But that’s the reason the interim agreements were largely hollow. In the Oslo Accords the two sides refrained from any serious discussion of the crucial questions. They didn’t decide on a prohibition of construction in the settlements, although during Rabin’s term construction stopped almost completely; it seems the location of the border, sovereignty over holy sites in Jerusalem, and the issue of the right of return were all postponed to the negotiations of the final agreement. In actuality, aside for the fact that the agreement was signed between Israel and the PLO, and not between Israel and a representative of the Palestinians in the territories (as Israel wished to do since the 1970s), the Oslo Accords did not offer a fresh new Israeli approach to the conflict, but instead were meant to put actual content into the autonomy agreement Menachem Begin signed on to in the peace accord with Egypt. That is how Beilin justified the process that started in Oslo on the behalf of the government.[[12]](#endnote-12) Put simply, Israel recognized the PLO, but its suspicious stance towards its intentions remained. Distrust, of course, produces distrust on the other side. Throughout the course of the process the Palestinians also remained skeptical. They have habitually called Israel’s offers over the years, including those the Israeli public has deemed far-reaching, including the offers made by Ehud Olmert when he served as prime minister (2006–9) during the negotiations at Annapolis and to Abu Mazen personally, *mu’amarah*, that is, a clever scheme intended to establish a limited state under Israeli supervision and supremacy (Tzanani 2015, 44).[[13]](#endnote-13)

**Interim: Justice or Economic Welfare**

This returns us to the discussion of the “liberal peace” paradigm. Devotees of this view assume, as noted above, that reconciliation could be attained between rival nationalist movements by functional means—that is, the fundamental landmines of the conflict could be defused by the division of the land, the separation of the populations, and economic compensation. They ignore the historical and religious dimensions of the conflict that adversely affect the likelihood of its resolution. Indeed, there’s a common thread among the many offers the Zionist movement, from its inception to Oslo, made to the Palestinians. Since the visionary of the state Theodor Herzl estimated that the economic and technological value that Jews would bring to Palestine would cause the Arab residents of the land to accept Zionism, to Netanyahu’s “economic peace” plans (Netanyahu 1993, 240), the Zionist outlook on this topic has not substantially changed.

The era of globalism—where economies have become interconnected—has bolstered this outlook, according to which as long as two states (or two nationalist movements) that are in conflict base their relationship on economic cooperation, which would improve the quality of life of their citizens, their willingness to take steps that would damage ongoing economic activity would diminish. But this paradigm, which seems on first look almost self-explanatory, is not so simple.

As Nitzan Feldman has noted in his study on the topic, “economic growth or cooperation between nations diminishes the likelihood they would fight each other, but they don’t show that these economic factors could lead to a signing of a peace agreement between them” (2009, 17).

In fact, when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, economic growth and the spread of education during the years of Israeli occupation actually increased the reservations of many Palestinians toward Israel and its offers of peace. It’s important to mention, for instance, that before the Second Intifada the Palestinian Authority enjoyed economic growth at a high rate of 9 percent. But this growth did not prevent the Second Intifada, which broke out in October 2000, because rapid growth can also cause a widening of gaps in society, and therefore destabilize it, and also because economic benefit can’t obscure historical issues and collective consciousness of having been wronged.

Indeed, the attempt to skip over the religious and historical components of the conflict at Oslo turned out to be ineffective at the moment of truth, when the two sides wished to discuss a permanent agreement, since doing so deprived Palestinians of a dominant element of their identity (Khoury 2016, 476). This is the reason the Palestinians insist so vehemently on the recognition of the right of return, even only on the level of a declaration. “The lack of an honest effort to contend with painful historical facts has hurt the essence of the peacemaking and reconciliation process,” so historian Rashid Khalidi analyzed the weakness of the Oslo process in retrospect (1998, 224). He meant that the arrangement offered was mainly “functional,” dealing with territorial exchange and a change in the mechanisms of governance, but lacked an effort to deal with the fundamental questions that led Zionism to clash with the Palestinians. Because the conflict was not, and still isn’t, only about the present and future, but also about the past. But Israelis believed—as author Amos Oz confidently promised in Oslo’s optimistic days—that it would be easier to conduct negotiations as if it is a real estate deal (1993, 248).

Aside from Rabin’s proclamation in his last address to the Knesset in October 1995, that “we didn’t come to an empty land here,” the Israeli leadership refrained from dealing with the narrative of the conflict, its responsibility for the distress of the Palestinians, and the significance of the agreement to the historical path of Zionism. As Peres promised optimistically, a short time after the signing of the Oslo Accords, “we’ll leave the historical polemic to the historians, and the diplomats will deal with contemporary goals, with shaping the present and the future, not with the past, so it won’t repeat itself” (1993, 161). That was a mistake. Israel wished to “put an end to the story” of the conflict without dealing with its narrative. But as opposed to a story, a national narrative does not have an end. Dealing with the past reflects on the present and on aspirations for the future. That’s why it’s important. Without dealing with the conflict’s narratives, that is, with questions related not only to 1967 but also to 1948, and even the beginning of Zionist settlement at the end of the nineteenth century, it seems the conflict won’t have a real end. It’s interesting that already in Buber’s critique of Herzl’s and Leon Pinsker’s diplomatic stance, he connected Zionist blindness to the “Arab question” to the liberal mindset that shaped the position of proponents of diplomatic Zionism. “[…] As enlightened as they were, they hardly understood history in terms of destiny, they didn’t understand the power of destiny in history; because that’s the meaning of a liberal experience from its foundation: to be immune to historical magnetism” (Buber 1984, 143).

Of course the problem with liberal peace isn’t the optimistic promise of “a better future” (Ward 2010, 34). After all, everyone strives toward a good life, wellbeing, and prosperity. The problem is in the view that national identities, anchored as they are in ancient narratives and fidelity to the earth and to holy places, could be easily replaced with an “advanced” mentality where we are all consumers and producers who seek material profit. But dividing the land while ignoring the historical and theological significance of it, and the meanings tied to the past—the imagined and the real—is not sufficient. It’s true that territorial division has a positive side—I don’t see a solution that is more efficient—but in the collective unconscious of the Palestinians it also bears a negative association in expressing a colonial mode of thought, which produced the division of the Middle East into nations under the influence of Britain and France since the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916. That is, even if reason demands the division of the land for the good of both sides—neocolonialist thought is embedded in this logic. Deep down, the Palestinians sense this.

The liberal peace paradigm has another side effect: the supporters and leaders of the peace process in its liberal version—most of whom tend to come from the highest socioeconomic class—see themselves as enlightened, and they are portrayed as such in influential circles in the West. Those who have reservations about their approach, who put up roadblocks to the attainment of peace by means of a simple division into two states, are seen as laggards who have missed the march of progress. Thus the Palestinian who insists on the recognition of the right of return and sovereignty over holy places—and on the other hand, the right-wing Israeli who refuses to give up the settlements and control over the territories—is seen as obsolete and not advanced. However, in the eyes of the radical camp their hard position is the more enlightened one, since it is anchored in principles of justice and commitment to the familial, communal, and national past. The leaders of the process should recognize this.

**Thoughts on the Future**

Lacking a peace agreement, and given Israel’s control of the 1967 territories, filmmaker Udi Aloni, the son of Shulamit Aloni, like others, defines Israel as an “apartheid state” (2016). He hopes for a binational state, and analyzes that the failure of the Oslo process was in its being a continuation of the colonial project, meant to control the Palestinians by more sophisticated means.

Aloni’s thesis reflects a trend of radicalization that has shaped the left’s (and the right’s) attitudes towards the current situation and future solutions. Aloni is mistaken, in my opinion, both in his analysis of the Oslo process and in his definition of Israel as an apartheid state, since a serious comparison between the characteristics of apartheid in South Africa and the situation in Israel shows significant differences.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Although the Zionist project has colonialist elements—if one sees Zionists as white Europeans who emigrated from the West to the East with the patronage of the British Empire—as is well known, other components of the project contradict its definition as colonialist: most European Jews were considered in the Diaspora to be “black” or “eastern” in origin; the Zionist project didn’t have a mother state, and during the Yishuv period relations between the British and Jewish residents of the land of Israel deteriorated to a rift and outbreaks of violence; Zionists didn’t seek to exploit Palestine’s natural resources for export, as common in colonies, but to use them for local development; the unique Zionist value of “Hebrew labor” stands in contradiction to the colonialist tendency to exploit the local labor force; and of course, it’s hard to deny the original connection of Jews to the land of Israel. While it’s true that since its founding, Israel (in its very definition as the state of the Jewish people) grants preference in certain fields to Jews, in Israel there is no racial segregation, and no legal hierarchy between Jews and Arabs. In addition, as for the limits placed on Palestinians in the territories, while several of them (like roads for Israeli citizens only) echo by association the laws of apartheid, they are explained by security needs, and in many ways the Palestinians live under autonomous rule. However, we must note that paradoxically, apartheid in South Africa in fact developed the more the white and black populations “mixed” with each other. South African history teaches that at a certain stage, as unity grew, whether in actuality or in potential, between whites and blacks, based on an emerging life of coexistence, it was these developments that generated the aspiration for apartheid. That is, racist thought, which wished to separate the populations based on racial “supremacy and purity,” actually stemmed from a reality where mixing and cooperation were growing, a situation that aroused fear among many whites. As a result, they saw apartheid as a necessary mode of rule, as also anchored in interpretation of Christian Scripture, and thus formed a white “political theology” that justified separation.[[15]](#endnote-15)

If Israel continues to avoid a decision on reconciliation, and at the same time demographic processes yield an equal number of Jews and Palestinians within the land of Israel west of the Jordan in the next few decades, and the populations mix with each other—given Zionism’s theological associations, a position could develop—which is for now marginal—that demands apartheid in Israel. This is the danger to be expected if we don’t act to give each of the nationalities independent sovereignty (even if we should consider creating a connection between Israel and Palestine by means of a type of confederation).

Thus the basic recipe that Oslo sought to advance, the division of the land, is still the most efficient solution. However, what Aloni told me in jest one night in a Tel Aviv bar deserves serious attention in order to advance the two-state solution: Aloni offered himself as the most moderate element on the political scale of the Middle East, since his position is between that of ISIS and the extremist settlers.

Thus it may be that the main problem that afflicts the peace process is that it is disconnected from those who are seen as representing the radical camps. In the Israeli-Palestinian context there is a paradox: the two camps making it difficult to achieve a settlement—Hamas and the Islamist organizations, and the settlers—are excluded from the management of the process. Beilin often warns of an Israeli policy “that would weaken the pragmatic Palestinian side and strengthen Hamas” (Beilin 2007), and Palestinian Authority officials use similar arguments, that is, the fear of Hamas’s consolidation, to protest Israeli policy toward the authority.

But what is the point of excluding radicals, if even the “moderate” camps, the secularists and liberals, on the two sides, refuse the concessions necessary for peace?

Indeed, instead of attempting, without success, “to moderate the moderates,” it may be better to actually let the “extremists,” those with religious inspiration, participate in negotiations. Moreover, in any case, as Israel’s representatives in contacts with the Palestinians since 2001 indicate, the line guiding the Israeli interest has moved from security considerations to political considerations that touch on taking account of the position of the settlers and the need to evacuate as few as possible of them in case of an agreement.[[16]](#endnote-16) Why then not involve the settlers, whose number continues to grow, directly in negotiations? Why not involve Hamas in the process?

Indeed, it may be that Hamas’s decision in April 2017 to publish a document of principles that declares it is willing to make do with a state within the 1967 borders is an important step in creating a new paradigm for the conflict. While the new document of principles also rejects the recognition of Israel, and the road to agreements with Hamas is still long (Steinberg 2017), in 1988 too, when the PLO declared its support of the two-state idea, it was a preliminary and insufficient step (since the organization still refused to disavow terrorism). Five years later, it turned out to be the basis of the arrangement between Israel and the PLO.

After all, because of their attachment to religion, and to land, and to absolute historical values, the radicals on the two sides have a wider epistemological common ground. Perhaps it’s there—between Hamas’s position and the position of the Israeli right, between Netanyahu’s demand that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish state and the Palestinian demand for full sovereignty over the Temple Mount—perhaps that’s where there is fruitful ground for an agreement.

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1. Actually, Beilin conducted the first months of the Oslo talks, which started in London in the beginning of December, between the scholars Yair Hirshfeld and Ron Pundak, Beilin’s emissaries, and Abu Ala, without the knowledge of Foreign Minister Peres and Prime Minister Rabin. Beilin only let Peres know in February 1993, and the latter soon informed Rabin. See “To: Yossi Beilin, From: Hirshfeld and Pundak. Subject: ‘Development of the Norwegian Channel, at the Request of Beilin, September 1, 1993.’” Yossi Beilin Archive, private file, Yad Tabenkin Archive. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. These data don’t include East Jerusalem, where 200,000 Jews lived in 2013. In the four years since the number of settlers has grown even more. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. However, although the support of the two-state idea has eroded, it is still more popular than the two other alternatives—one state or a confederation. According to a survey conducted in February 2017 by the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research at Tel Aviv University and the Palestinian Institute for Diplomacy and Public Opinion Research (PSR), 55 percent of Israelis and 44 percent of Palestinians support a two-state solution. At the time of the signing of the Oslo Accords more than 66 percent of Israelis, and more than 70 percent of Palestinians supported the idea. For full details see the website of the Tami Steinmetz Center: http://peace.tau.ac.il/index.php/active-research/176-psr. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Micah Goodman, who wrote a bestseller on the diplomatic differences, also reached a similar conclusion: see Goodman 2017, 136–47. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The description of the conflict was written in the journal of Dr. Saeb Erekat, who participated in the summit as a senior member of the Palestinian delegation, which was then transferred to Beilin’s personal archive. “Erekat’s Journal, July 24, 2000,” Yossi Beilin Archive. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. On Shamir’s relationship with the Jewish religion see Shilon 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. David Ben-Gurion, “Letter to Mapai Friends,” June 28, 1956, **אב"ג**. Not sure how to translate the last part. Is this from a manuscript collection? [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Moshe Sharet, “Yisrael ve-‘arav: milhamah ve-shalom,” selections from a lecture at Bet Berl, October 1957. The lecture was published in the Ha-ma‘arakh newspaper *‘Ot* in 1966, and appears on the website of the association for Moshe Sharet’s heritage. Sharet said these things after he was dismissed from his position as prime minister and foreign minister, following the return of Ben-Gurion from his self-imposed vacation at Sde Boker from 1953–55. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Interview with the author, May 20, 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See for instance “Ha-she’elah ha-ne’elamah,” a 1907 essay by the educator Yitzhak Epstein (Ha-shiloah, Ahiasaf, 1907, pp. 192–205). Ahad Ha-am also discussed the Palestinian question in his early writings. For instance, “the historical right of a people in relation to the land settled by others is none other than this: the right to return and settle in the land of his fathers, to work it and develop its resource without disturbance […] but this historical right does not cancel the right of the rest of the inhabitants of the land, who come with a real right of living and working the land for generations. For them too, this land is their national home in the present, and it’s also their right to develop their national resources according to their ability. This situation therefore makes the land of Israel a common place for different people, each trying to build their national home there.” Ahad Ha-am, “‘Al parashat derakhim,” introduction to the new edition, 1920. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. “Key Points from the Meeting in the U.S. 8.27.1993.” Yossi Beilin Archive, private file, Yad Tabenkin Archive. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Knesset protocol. Meeting 367 of the 13th Knesset. June 28, 1995. “Suggestion for the Agenda —towards the realization of Step 2 of the Oslo Agreement.” [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Olmert was the last prime minister who tried to offer an agreement to the Palestinians. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Raif Zarik and Azar Dakwar, in a fascinating essay that has not yet been published, compare Israel and South Africa. The comparison was conducted according to the following elements: labor market relations; political theology; the encompassing diplomatic framework; the role of languages in the state. Their conclusion is that those components that contributed to the creation of apartheid play a different role in Israel, which delays the understanding of Israeli reality as apartheid, although they argue that in certain situations there are degrees of separation on the level that were in place in South Africa. See “‘Al derom-afrikah de’az ve’al Palestin/Israel: Ha-‘apartayd ve-ofne ha-masgato,” in ‘Analogiyat ha-apartayd le-palestin/yisra’el ve-gevulot gizratah: Ha-mabat mi-palestin, ed. Huneida Ghanem and Azar Dakwar (forthcoming), 187–88. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. The testimony of Dr. Shaul Arieli, who served as a brigadier-general in the IDF as the head of the administration of the interim and permanent agreements until he retired from the army in 2001. In Tzanani 2015, 72. For more on this see also Arieli 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)