Arab–Zionist Conversations in Late Ottoman Jerusalem: Saʿid al-Husayni, Ruhi al-Khalidi and Eliezer Ben-Yehuda

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Face and discourse are tied. The face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse ... [I]t is discourse and, more exactly, response or responsibility which is this authentic relationship [with the Other].

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What might a Zionist and an Arab have said to each other had they met in late Ottoman Jerusalem? How might they have attempted to understand one another's values and concerns and how might they have responded? Fortunately, we needn't guess.² In this chapter, I analyze accounts of two such conversations that took place in Jerusalem in 1909 and were recorded

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- 1 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, ed. Philippe Nemo, trans. Richard A. Cohen, 15th ed. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006), 87–88. See also “Ethics and the Face” in Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2016), 194–219.
 - 2 I am grateful to Angelos Dalachanis and Vincent Lemire for inviting me to participate in this volume and for their feedback on this chapter. I was introduced to the late Ottoman Palestinian world of Muhammad Ruhi al-Khalidi by my mentor Rashid Khalidi, to whom I remain deeply indebted. Thanks to Yfaat Weiss, Yoni Furas, and Yoni Mendel for inviting me to present the keynote lecture at the Franz Rosenzweig Minerva Research Center (at the Hebrew University) workshop on “Pedagogy of Separation: Hebrew and Arab Education in British Mandate Palestine” in summer 2016. This lecture led me back to one of the conversations analyzed here, and thus to the beginnings of this chapter. Thanks to Emanuel Beška, Sarit Kattan Gribetz, Dotan Halevy, Ethan Katz, Nadirah Mansour, and Derek Penslar for their critical comments.

on the pages of the Jerusalem-based Zionist Hebrew newspaper *Ha-Tsevi*.³ In both cases, the interlocutor was the paper's founding editor, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. His interviewees were two of the three recently-elected representatives of the Jerusalem district in the Ottoman parliament: Sa'id al-Husayni and Muhammad Ruhi al-Khalidi.⁴ Ben-Yehuda's reports on these conversations were published just days after the respective encounters, and scholars of the Arab–Zionist encounter have long been interested in them. In his now-classic 1976 book *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, Neville Mandel noted that al-Husayni and al-Khalidi “both were clearly opposed to Jewish settlement in Palestine” and “made their attitudes known through interviews with *ha-Zevi*.” Mandel noticed that al-Husayni and al-Khalidi explained their opposition to Zionism in different ways: while al-Husayni contended that Palestine could not practically “support large-scale Jewish immigration,” al-Khalidi, who in Mandel's view, was “more forthright and original” than his fellow parliamentarian, articulated the position that “the Arabs were in Palestine as of right and they did not owe the Jews anything.”⁵ Mandel was a careful reader and his insights, now more than four decades old, remain instructive and compelling for any study of the early years of the Arab–Zionist conflict.

And yet, I contend, these two conversation accounts still have more to tell us about the Arab–Zionist encounter in late Ottoman Jerusalem. Because Mandel read these texts specifically to discern what they reveal about Palestinian Arab perspectives on Zionism in the years before the First World War, he was not concerned with the genre of the texts and the immediate contexts in which they were produced. In my view, however, the fact that these texts emerged from dialogue is critical. Thus, while I share Mandel's interests in early Arab responses to Zionism, I also read the interviews to ascertain in what ways the

3 The first interview, with Sa'id al-Husayni, was published on November 1, 1909, as “Two conversations. A: My conversation with Sa'id Effendi,” *Ha-Tsevi* 26, No. 28 (17 Heshvan 1841 after the destruction), 1–2. The second interview, with Muhammad Ruhi al-Khalidi, was published on November 2, 1909, as “Two conversations. B: My conversation with Ruhi al-Khalidi,” *Ha-Tsevi* 26, No. 29 (18 Heshvan 1841 after the destruction), 1–2. On Ben-Yehuda and his newspaper *Ha-Tsevi*, see Hassan Ahmad Hassan and Abdul-Hameed al-Kayyali's chapter, “Ben-Yehuda in His Ottoman Milieu: An Analysis of Jerusalem's public sphere as reflected in the Hebrew Newspaper *Ha-Tsevi*,” in this volume.

4 On the first postrevolution parliamentary election in Palestine, see Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 109–29. The third delegate elected from the broader Jerusalem province was Hafiz al-Sa'id of Jaffa.

5 Neville J. Mandel, *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 76. Mandel later changed his name to Yosef Lamdan.

act of conversation with the Other – face-to-face engagement in which one is compelled to answer questions and provide clarifications and rationales – affected both the articulation and the substance of the views expressed. In other words, I do not read these interviews as though they were prewritten speeches that might have been delivered uninterrupted at a podium or as though they were essays or diary entries that might have been written in the solitude of the author's private study. The statements found in these texts emerged in the context of interpersonal encounter, through questions, and they followed the dynamics of a historical conversation in a particular setting: a journalist's office in the Ottoman-ruled city of Jerusalem. Moreover, the questioner was neither a fellow Arab nor an ostensibly neutral journalist from abroad; he was, rather, a prominent Zionist, an active member of the movement that was the primary topic of concern in the conversations. This fact no doubt informed the way the parliamentarians answered the questions, and also permits us to study these conversations not only for what they reveal to us about the interviewees but also for what they show us about the interviewer. Ben-Yehuda was a critical actor in these encounters and his role in them should not be ignored.

What we have in these articles is Ben-Yehuda's version of the encounters. As far as I am aware, we do not have al-Husayni's or al-Khalidi's notes from the same conversations.⁶ Thus, while I hope to demonstrate that there is much to be gained by reading these texts closely and carefully for what was said, what was not said, and how each participant explained himself and clarified his views over the course of the conversations, we must continually be mindful that we are reading the encounters as filtered through the memory, the records, the Hebrew translation (Ben-Yehuda did not indicate in which language he conversed with al-Husayni, but with al-Khalidi he spoke French),⁷ and the

6 The Khalidiyya Library, the family's remarkable collection of Islamic manuscripts, newspapers, journals, and books, is a most valuable source for studies of late Ottoman Jerusalem; I remain grateful to Haifa al-Khalidi for welcoming me over the course of many weeks into the family library. I have not found there, though, any independent record of these conversations.

7 On French as the language of conversation between Ben-Yehuda and al-Khalidi, see below. As will be addressed below, al-Husayni studied and apparently had a working knowledge of Hebrew, so it is possible that he spoke with Ben-Yehuda in that language. However, Ben-Yehuda would likely have remarked on this in his account, and the fact that he did not suggests that they did not converse in Hebrew. Ben-Yehuda employed Arabic in his linguistic and dictionary work and, living in late Ottoman Palestine, he surely used some level of Arabic in daily life. In 1908, he recalled that in 1892 "I understood, then, only very little Arabic," apparently implying that he had since learned significantly more. See "Hanukkah," *Ha-Tsevi* 25, No. 56 (24 Kislev 1840 after the destruction [1908]), 2. See Yosef Lang, *Daber Ivrit! : Haya Eli'ezer ben-Yehuda* [Speak Hebrew! The life of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda] (Jerusalem: Yad Yizhak

conscious and unconscious biases of an engaged interlocutor who presented these accounts on the pages of his own ideologically-committed newspaper.

This newspaper is one of numerous Jewish periodicals from late Ottoman and Mandate Palestine that have been digitized and made freely available on the internet through a joint venture between the National Library of Israel (NLI) and Tel-Aviv University.⁸ To date, seventeen Jewish periodicals from the pre-1948 period in Palestine have been digitized and made available on this website: *Ha-Levanon* (1863),⁹ *Havatselet* (1863, 1870–1911), *Yehuda vi-Rushalayim* (1877–78), *Ha-Tsevi/Ha-Or* (1884–1902, 1908–15), *Hashkafa* (1896–1900, 1902–8), *Ha-Me'asef* (1896–1914), *Ha-Po'el ha-Tsa'ir* (1907–70), *Ha-Herut* (1909–17), *Moriya* (1910–15), *Do'ar ha-Yom* (1919–36), *Palestine Bulletin/Palestine Post* (1925–32, 1932–50), *Davar* (1925–96), *Kol ha-'Am* (1937–75), *Ha-Tsofe* (1937–2008), *Ha-Mashkif* (1939–49), *Hed ha-Mizrah* (1942–44, 1949–51), and *Al ha-Mishmar* (1943–95). This archive of searchable periodicals offers researchers a veritable treasure trove of sources that can be analyzed to learn about many aspects of Palestine's late Ottoman and Mandate-era history – if mostly from the perspectives of its diverse Jewish communities. The perspectives of non-Jews, however, occasionally found their way into these papers as well, as we shall see below. The NLI has more recently started to scan its collection of Arabic periodicals from late Ottoman and Mandate Palestine through the Jrayed project.¹⁰ Thus far, twenty-seven periodicals have been at least partially scanned, with searchable authors and titles. Those published in Jerusalem

Ben-Zvi, 2008), 31, n. 109; 177, 266, 716. Lang appears to misunderstand the Arabic *mawjūd* in his interpretation of this story. Ben-Yehuda is not, however, listed by Eliezer Beeri as a writer and reader of Arabic. See Eliezer Beeri, *Reshit ha-Sikhsukh Yisra'el-'Arav, 1882–1911* [The beginning of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1882–1911] (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1985), 187–88. On Arabic readers upon whom Ben-Yehuda relied, see Lang, *Daber Yvrit!*, 220, n. 21; 716; n. 165. In the end, it seems most likely that, like Ben-Yehuda and al-Khalidi, Ben-Yehuda and al-Husayni also conversed in French. I am grateful to Israel Bartal, Michelle Campos, Liora Halperin, Hanan Harif and Arie Saposnik for discussing this matter with me.

8 Website of Historical Jewish Press, accessed January 18, 2018, <http://web.nli.org.il/sites/JPress/English>.

9 *Ha-Levanon*, which used these Latin-script names over the course of its years of publication – *Halbanon*, *Libanon*, and *The Lebanon* – was initially published in Jerusalem but, after the first year, moved to Paris, then Mainz, and then London. Menucha Gilboa, *Leksikon ha-'Itanut ha-'Yvrit ba-Me'ot ha-Shemone-'Esre ve-ha-Tesha-'Esre* [Lexicon of Hebrew press in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries] (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1992), 186–95.

10 <http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLIS/en/Jrayed/>.

include *al-Nafa'is al-Asriyya* (1908–24), *Mira'at al-Sharq* (1919–39), *al-Akhbar al-Kanasiyya* (1925–), *al-Miya al-Hayya* (f. 1935), *al-Salam wa-l-Khayr* (f. 1937), *al-Muntada/al-Qafila* (1943–47), *al-Wahda* (f. 1945), *al-Ghadd* (1945–47), *al-Mustaqbal* (1945–48), *al-Dhakhira* (1946–47), and *al-Minbar* (1947–48). This electronic archiving of the diverse newspapers of late Ottoman and Mandate Palestine opens endless windows onto the city's many communities and neighborhoods – and perspectives. In peering through one such window, the present chapter is indebted to this press archival project.

Conversation Partners

Before we examine the reports of these interviews, let us introduce the figures involved, though for those more familiar with late Ottoman Jerusalem none of the three require an introduction.¹¹ Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858–1922) was born Eliezer Yitshak Perelman in Luzhki, a Lithuanian village in the Russian Empire, to a Hasidic Jewish family.¹² He received the standard young Jewish boy's education in a heder before leaving to study in a yeshiva. In the yeshiva in Polotsk, Perelman was exposed not only to Talmudic literature, the core of the elite Jewish male curriculum, but also, clandestinely, to secular and linguistic writings in Hebrew. Eager to pursue his secular studies, he travelled to Paris in 1878. During his four years there, he came to espouse a form of Jewish nationalism focused on the Land of Israel and the Hebrew language (he signed his first major published essay on the subject with the name Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, a name he used from that point forward). In 1881, he immigrated to Palestine and settled in Jerusalem where, from the start, he engaged in Hebrew journalism. At first, he found employment on the staff of an existing Hebrew newspaper, *Havatsalet* (Lily). Later he founded his own newspaper, which, over the years, had different names: *Ha-Tsevi* (The Gazelle), *Ha-Or* (The Light), and *Hashkafah* (Outlook).¹³ Ben-Yehuda's papers were generally edited by him and his family, especially his wife Hemda and his son Itamar Ben-Avi (son of "Avi," which

11 The biographical information I provide here on Ben-Yehuda and al-Khalidi has appeared previously in Jonathan Marc Gribetz, *Defining Neighbors: Religion, Race, and the Early Zionist-Arab Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

12 For a thorough biography of Ben-Yehuda, see Lang, *Daber Ivrit!*

13 Initially, from 1896 to 1900, *Hashkafa* was published as a diaspora-oriented supplement to *Ha-Tsevi*, but later, from 1902 to 1908, it replaced *Ha-Tsevi*, which closed due to tensions with the Ottoman authorities. See "Hashkafa," Historical Jewish Press, accessed January 18, 2018, <http://web.nli.org.il/sites/JPress/English/Pages/hashkaf.aspx>.

literally means “my father,” but is also an acronym of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda). In conjunction with his Hebrew journalism, Ben-Yehuda also aimed to help transform Hebrew from only a written language into one of daily spoken use as well. His linguistic project included the creation of neologisms for modern items and concepts and the production of a new, multivolume Hebrew dictionary to help define and expand the vocabulary of Palestine’s newly Hebrew-speaking Jewish population. But it was in his role as a journalist – not a linguist – that, nearly three decades after his immigration to Palestine, Ben-Yehuda met with his partners in the conversations under analysis here: Sa’id al-Husayni and Muhammad Ruhi al-Khalidi.

Sa’id al-Husayni (1878–1945) hailed from one of the most notable Muslim families in Jerusalem. Members of the Husayni family had regularly held the positions of Hanafi mufti of Jerusalem, *shaykh al-ḥaram*, and *naqīb al-ashrāf* since at least the eighteenth century.¹⁴ The family owned significant property within and beyond Jerusalem.¹⁵ Sa’id’s father, Ahmad Rasim al-Husayni, had received a traditional Islamic education and, after a career in commerce, was appointed *naqīb al-ashrāf*.¹⁶ In contrast, according to historian Rashid Khalidi,

- 14 For Sa’id al-Husayni’s biographical data, I rely largely on Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 68–69. See also Muhammad Y. Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 82. On the Husayni family’s religious administrative positions in Ottoman Jerusalem, see Butrus Abu-Manneh, “The Ḥusaynis: The Rise of a Notable Family in 18th Century Palestine,” in *Palestine in the Late Ottoman Period: Political, Social, and Economic Transformation*, ed. David Kushner (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1986). Abu-Manneh notes that those who held these religious and other administrative positions were, since the late eighteenth century, the descendants of Sayyid ‘Abd al-Latif b. ‘Abdallah b. ‘Abd al-Latif (d. 1775).
- 15 See entry on “al-Ḥusayni, Sa’id,” in Adil Manna, *A’lam Filastin fi awakhir al-‘ahd al-‘uthmani: (1800–1918)* [The notables of Palestine at the end of the Ottoman Period, 1800–1918] (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1995), 129–30. See also “Sa’id al-Ḥusayni” in Muhammad ‘Umar Hamada, *A’lam Filastin: min al-qarn al-awwal hatta l-khamis ‘ashara hijri, min al-qarn al-sabi’ hatta l-‘ishrin miladi* [The notables of Palestine: from the first century until the fifteenth century AH, from the seventh century until the twentieth century AD], vol. 4. (Damascus: Dar al-Qutaiba, 2000), 31.
- 16 On the *naqīb al-ashrāf*, see Abba Muhtadi and Falestin Naïli’s chapter, “Back into the Imperial Fold: The End of Egyptian Rule as Portrayed in the Court Records of Jerusalem, 1839–1840,” in this volume, as well as Vincent Lemire and Yasemin Avcı, “De la modernité administrative à la modernisation urbaine: une réévaluation de la municipalité ottomane de Jérusalem (1867–1917),” in *Municipalités méditerranéennes. Les réformes urbaines ottomanes au miroir d’une histoire comparée (Moyen-Orient, Maghreb, Europe méridionale)*, ed. Nora Lafi (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 2005).

Sa'īd "received a modern education from the outset, culminating in a time at a school run by the Alliance Israélite [Universelle] sufficient for him to learn Hebrew."¹⁷ Al-Husayni's Hebrew knowledge was put to use as he served for some time as the Ottoman censor of the Hebrew press. In 1905, he was elected head of the Jerusalem city council;¹⁸ he also served other Ottoman official roles in the Jerusalem province, including as head of the government's education division.¹⁹ After the Young Turk Revolution and the reinstitution of the Ottoman parliament, he was elected in 1908 as one of the representatives of the province of Jerusalem. Toward the end of the Great War, al-Husayni joined the Arab Revolt and, immediately after the war, served briefly as foreign minister of Faysal's short-lived government in Syria under Prime Minister 'Alī Rida al-Rikabi.²⁰ Al-Husayni lived almost until the end of the British Mandate

17 Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, 69. See also Mandel, *The Arabs and Zionism*, 65. On the Alliance schools in Palestine, including the vocational school for boys founded in Jerusalem in 1882, see Jacob M. Landau, "The Educational Impact of Western Culture on Traditional Society in Nineteenth Century Palestine," in *Studies on Palestine during the Ottoman Period*, ed. Moshe Ma'oz (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 501–2. On the efforts and opposition to teaching Hebrew in the Alliance's Jerusalem school system, see Michael M. Laskier, "Aspects of the Activities of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in the Jewish Communities of the Middle East and North Africa: 1860–1918," *Modern Judaism* 3, no. 2 (1983): 157. For an example of the schedule of subjects taught in the Alliance's Jerusalem school in the late nineteenth century, see the 1892 "*École de l'Alliance Israélite à Jérusalem: Programme des Classes*," vol. 2, p. 316, in the Alliance Israélite Universelle's file at the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem. The languages included in the academic program were Arabic, French, Hebrew, and Turkish. According to Ben-Arieh, "the first to recognize the importance of the [Alliance] school were not Jews but gentiles, among them the district governor and the Khalidi and al-Husseini families." Yehoshua Ben-Arieh, *Jerusalem in the 19th Century: Emergence of the New City* (Jerusalem: Yad Yizhak Ben-Zvi, 1986), 269. On Arab students in a different Alliance school in Palestine, the Mikveh Israel agricultural school near Jaffa, see Amin Khalaf and Dotan Halevy, "Ke-Gerim ba-'Arets: Bet ha-Sefer ha-Hakla'i Mikveh Yisra'el ve-Talmidav ha-'Aravim, 1870–1939" [Foreigners in their country: the Mikveh-Israel Agricultural School and its Arab students, 1870–1939], *Zmanim* 135 (2016).

18 Manna, *A'lam Filastin*, 129. According to Michael Fischbach, al-Husayni was mayor of Jerusalem from 1902 to 1906. See Philip Mattar, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Palestinians* (New York: Facts on File, 2005), s.v. "al-Husayni (family)."

19 Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*, 121.

20 Manna, *A'lam Filastin*, 129–30; Muslih, *The Origins of Palestinian Nationalism*, 119; Hamada, *A'lam Filastin*, 4:31.

era and, according to historian Adel Manna, largely avoided politics during that period.²¹

In the Ottoman parliament, al-Husayni's senior colleague from Jerusalem (and the candidate who ultimately won the most votes in the final round of voting)²² was Muhammad Ruhi al-Khalidi (1864–1913). Al-Khalidi grew up in Jerusalem's Old City in a home just steps away from Bab al-Silsala, the Chain Gate entrance to the Noble Sanctuary/Temple Mount complex.²³ Like the Husaynis, the Khalidis were among the small number of elite Sunni Muslim Arab families in Ottoman Jerusalem that played central roles in the economic, political, and religious life of the holy city. Muhammad Ruhi's uncle, Yusuf Ziya' al-Khalidi (1829–1906),²⁴ served as mayor of Jerusalem and as one of Jerusalem's representatives in the first, short-lived Ottoman parliament. Muhammad Ruhi (known as Ruhi) was educated in Sunni religious schools in Jerusalem. The Shāfi'ī mufti of Jerusalem certified that al-Khalidi had completed training in all the classical subjects of the Islamic curriculum. He continued his religious studies in Nablus, Tripoli, and Beirut as his father Yassin took up various Ottoman-appointed religious positions in these different cities. By the age of fifteen, al-Khalidi had been granted a scholarly title in the Ottoman Islamic religious hierarchy by none other than the Shaykh al-Islam in Istanbul.²⁵ If al-Khalidi's education began in a distinctly religious context, it soon extended into realms beyond traditional pious training (and, in this sense, his experience can be seen as a parallel to Ben-Yehuda's). As al-Khalidi became a young man, he acquired those elements of a Western education that began to be offered in the new Ottoman state schools,²⁶ and, like al-Husayni, even at the Jewish Alliance Israélite Universelle school in Jerusalem, where he

21 Manna, *A'lam Filastin*, 129–30. Manna notes one exception: in 1928 al-Husayni was a member of the Islamic conference for the defense of the Aqsa mosque and the Islamic holy place.

22 Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*, 121.

23 This presentation of al-Khalidi's biography follows the one I provide in Gribetz, *Defining Neighbors*.

24 In a letter written on March 1, 1899, in French, to Zadoc Kahn, al-Khalidi rendered his name Yusuf Zia al-Khalidy. The letter is found in the Central Zionist Archives, file H197.

25 Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, 76–77.

26 Al-Khalidi studied at the *Rüşdiyye* schools in Jerusalem and Tripoli and at the *Sultaniye* schools in Beirut. Ibid. For a concise overview of the development of various forms of education in Palestine, see Ami Ayalon, *Reading Palestine: Printing and Literacy, 1900–1948* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 19–39. See also Rashid Khalidi, "Intellectual Life in Late Ottoman Jerusalem," in *Ottoman Jerusalem: The Living City, 1517–1917*, ed. Sylvia Auld and Robert Hillenbrand (London: Altajir World of Islam Trust, 2000), 225.

too studied briefly.²⁷ Al-Khalidi's secular studies began in Palestine, but they continued with much greater intensity when he left the Levant. In 1887, at the age of twenty-three, al-Khalidi went to the Ottoman capital, where he studied at the Mekteb-i Mülkiye (Civil Service School). Following more than six years of study in Istanbul, al-Khalidi, nearly thirty, traveled to Paris –the city from which Ben-Yehuda had migrated just six years earlier. There he undertook a three-year course in political science and then enrolled in the École Pratique des Hautes Études. Under some of the most distinguished French orientalists of the day, he studied the philosophy of Islam and Eastern literature. Al-Khalidi even went on to a brief career as an academic in France, teaching Arabic to students and scholars of oriental studies. In 1898, al-Khalidi transitioned from academia to politics, taking up the position of Ottoman consul general in Bordeaux. He served in this role for a decade, until 1908, the year of the Young Turk Revolution in the Ottoman Empire, when he returned to Palestine in his bid for a seat in the new parliament.

Though Jews and Christians were among the numerous parliamentary candidates from the Jerusalem district, the winners were three Muslims; Jewish and Christian candidates appear to have split their respective communities' votes and thus none emerged victorious.²⁸ Nonetheless, despite some controversy in the midst of the election, during which Sa'id al-Husayni was accused by some of anti-Semitism, the Jewish community appeared to welcome optimistically the election of Jerusalem's parliamentarians. At a celebration thrown for the three in Jerusalem in October 1908, David Yellin, an unsuccessful Jewish candidate for the same office, played on the meaning of the Arabic names of the three winners: Ruḥi (my spirit) "will revive the spirit;" Sa'id (happy) "will make us happy;" and Ḥafīz (guard) "will guard and protect our rights."²⁹

After the parliamentarians' first year in office, some in the Jewish community of Palestine were less confident than Yellin may have been at that post-election party. It was precisely in this context of concern that Ben-Yehuda arranged to interview al-Husayni and al-Khalidi, just before they were to return to Istanbul after their visit back to their hometown in October 1909. In

27 Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, 77. According to al-Khalidi himself, he did not know Hebrew, though it is not clear whether he meant that he had never studied Hebrew or that he never advanced sufficiently in the language to become proficient. See "Interview with Ruhi Effendi: Our Representative in Constantinople," *Ha-Tsevi* 25, No. 20 (7 Heshvan 1840 after the destruction/November 2, 1908), 1.

28 Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*, 119.

29 *Ha-Tsevi*, October 27, 1908, 2. Cited also in Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*, 126. All translations of *Ha-Tsevi* articles are my own.

his introductory remarks, Ben-Yehuda explains, "I wanted to hear from them before they departed their thoughts on the status of matters in the empire generally, and I wanted in particular to hear their thoughts on and attitude toward the issues that most concern us Jews." Ben-Yehuda notes that he sought out these interviews and wished to address the matters most sensitive to his community and to his readers because "it is always preferable to know the state of the issue as it is, whether good or bad."³⁰

In Ben-Yehuda's opinion, understanding the perspectives of Jerusalem's parliamentary representatives was critical at this point not simply because these were influential individuals but because Ben-Yehuda anticipated that a debate on the issue of Zionism would soon take place in parliament.³¹ "The hour is very important," Ben-Yehuda wrote in *Ha-Tsevi*, as "there is no doubt that one of the first questions that the parliament will deal with after it is opened now is the question of Jews' coming to the Land of Israel." Ben-Yehuda reasoned that, while "the fate of this question will not depend entirely on the three representatives from the Land of Israel alone," he believed that their perspective as natives and representatives of the province would be granted "great weight on the parliament's scales in deciding this way or that." This was not only because their views would be respected but also because "with them will go also the representatives of Syria and, one thinks, all of the Arab representatives." Ben-Yehuda assumed that the Arab delegates in the parliament would fall in line with whatever position Palestine's own Arab representatives presented. He acknowledged that, "notwithstanding their large number in our parliament," the Arab members "do not alone control the fate of the question" of Jewish immigration to Palestine. But he insisted that while there may be

30 The record of the conversation described here is found in "Two conversations. A: My conversation with Sa'īd Effendi."

31 On the parliament's first consideration of Zionism in 1909, see Mandel, *The Arabs and Zionism before World War I*, 72. On the eventual debates on Zionism in the Ottoman parliament in 1911, see *ibid.*, 93–116; Louis Fishman, "Understanding the 1911 Ottoman Parliament Debate on Zionism in Light of the Emergence of a 'Jewish Question,'" in *Late Ottoman Palestine: The Period of Young Turk Rule*, ed. Yuval Ben-Bassat and Eyal Ginio (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011); Julia Phillips Cohen and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, eds., "A Debate on Zionism in the Ottoman Parliament (1911)," in *Sephardi Lives: A Documentary History, 1700–1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); Emanuel Beška, "Anti-Zionist Attitudes and Activities of Rūḥī Al-Khālīdī," in *Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honour of Ján Pauliny*, ed. Zuzana Gažáková and Jaroslav Drobný (Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 2016), 184–88. See also chap. 7 in Vincent Lemire, *Jerusalem 1900: The Holy City in the Age of Possibilities*, trans. Catherine Tihanyi and Lys Ann Weiss (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

some in the parliament who view the issue differently from the representatives of Jerusalem and the Arab provinces, “it seems we do not have many friends among the rest of the elements in parliament and we are not even certain how the few Jewish representatives will relate to this question.” In other words, Ben-Yehuda concluded that there was no denying the fact that “the opinion of our parliamentarians, [those] of Jerusalem, is crucial.”

“What is the Meaning of ‘Mass’?” Defining Terms, and Positions, in Conversation

At their meeting on Friday, October 29, 1909, Ben-Yehuda explains that he implored al-Husayni to speak candidly even about sensitive and uncomfortable matters, “even on matters and questions that are close to me and touch me most personally as a Jew.” Ben-Yehuda recalled telling al-Husayni that “we live now in a free country,³² consisting of many groups and nations. Each group and each nation guards its interests and we have to get used to this and accept it, to live in personal friendship with one another, even as the group and national questions separate us.” Ben-Yehuda notes that he assured al-Husayni that he would only put on the record that which al-Husayni permitted and that “I would not publish anything except that which he permitted me to publish.” Ben-Yehuda presumably knew that al-Husayni could read Hebrew and had previously served as Hebrew press censor – a censorship regime that led to Ben-Yehuda’s brief imprisonment in 1893.³³ So Ben-Yehuda was, we might imagine, especially careful both to record the conversation accurately but also to be sure not to include elements of the conversation al-Husayni wished not to make public.

Initially Ben-Yehuda posed a number of questions about matters of general concern to the empire. First, he asked about politics at the highest level of the imperial administration, focusing particularly on the seemingly tense relationship between Grand Vizier Hilmi Pasha, on the one hand, and the Young Turks

32 In Hebrew, “*mamlakha hofshit*,” lit. free kingdom.

33 Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, *Eli’ezer ben-Yehuda be-Vet ha-Asurim, Hanuka 654/1893: Igrot* [Eliezer Ben-Yehuda in prison, Hannukah 654/1893], ed. Yehoshua Kaniel (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1983). On the corresponding Ottoman archival documents, see Michael Talbot, “Jews, Be Ottomans! Zionism, Ottomanism, and Ottomanisation in the Hebrew-Language Press, 1890–1914,” *Die Welt des Islams* 56, nos. 3/4 (2016): 368–70.

and the Committee of Union and Progress newspaper *Tanin*, on the other.³⁴ Al-Husayni responded that he had not noticed any major opposition to Hilmi Pasha. Ben-Yehuda then turned to ordinary constituent concerns: policing, postal services, and taxes, contending that nothing had changed since the re-institution of the parliament. “What,” Ben-Yehuda asked, “did the parliament do during its first session?” From the written source we have, it is difficult to discern the tone of the question but, on the surface, the question does not sound particularly obsequious, as Ben-Yehuda seems to think that, in fact, the parliament had not accomplished very much at all.³⁵ Nonetheless, the question permitted al-Husayni to tout the parliament’s accomplishments; his answer to this question is the longest of all. Despite the many challenges, boasted al-Husayni, the parliament approved a budget and “instituted many good laws in all areas of internal governance,” though one cannot expect “to turn everything around overnight.” After al-Husayni presented this defense of the work done in the parliament’s first session, Ben-Yehuda asked about what to expect from the second session that was about to begin. Again al-Husayni noted the task of setting the government’s budget and other routine matters. It is worth noting that, at least as far as Ben-Yehuda presents the conversation to his readers, he did not probe further on any of the matters al-Husayni discussed in his answers. He asked the question, listened to al-Husayni’s response, and moved on to the next subject.

This dynamic changed when Ben-Yehuda finally broached “perhaps the most difficult point in our conversation,” namely the question of Jewish settlement in Palestine. Again, Ben-Yehuda notes that he beseeched al-Husayni to be frank in his answer to how he would relate to this question should it soon appear on the parliamentary agenda. Al-Husayni reportedly responded as follows:

Sir, I believe the Jews have many important merits. They are intelligent, sharp, nimble, industrious, work-loving, energetic and frugal. The Jews will truly be able to be a model for other residents in the empire, and there is no doubt that they will bring much benefit to the empire and its residents anywhere they settle. Therefore, Turkey [the Ottoman Empire]

34 On *Tanin*, see Hasan Kayalı, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 54.

35 This sentiment appears even more clearly in the account of Ben-Yehuda’s interview with al-Khalidi the following day, when Ben-Yehuda reports that he asked al-Khalidi: “What about the issue of the necessary reforms in all spheres of domestic leadership? Thus far we see almost nothing in reality.”

must accept them with truly open arms. However, both for the Jews' own sake, and for the sake of the empire and the rest of its residents, it is best that the Jews settle in all provinces of the empire and not concentrate in one place [*be-maḳom eḥad*].

Here, al-Husayni, speaking directly to, and presumably looking in the eyes of a Jew, lavishes praise on his interlocutor's people. But al-Husayni insists that, for everyone's sake, Jewish immigrants to the Ottoman Empire ought to scatter throughout it rather than concentrate in "one place."³⁶

Ben-Yehuda expressed agreement with this view. "I agree in essence," he responded. We must recall that Ben-Yehuda, just a few years earlier, openly supported the so-called "Uganda Plan" to found a Jewish state, at least temporarily, in East Africa. Indeed, he had published a book of his essays on the subject in 1905 called *Ha-Medina ha-Yehudit: Ma'amarim Shonim 'al Devar Hatsa'at Mizrah Afrika* (The Jewish state: various articles on the East Africa proposal).³⁷ Having lived in Ottoman Jerusalem since the early 1880s, Ben-Yehuda was well aware of the challenges that faced the Jewish national colonial project in Palestine and in the Ottoman Empire more broadly.³⁸ By 1909, as he sat with al-Husayni, however, the East Africa proposal was no longer on the table and, notwithstanding the Territorialist splinter group, Palestine was once again the primary focus of Jewish nationalist aspirations.

Unlike earlier in the conversation, Ben-Yehuda, upon hearing al-Husayni's answer, did not simply move on to the next topic. He followed up and delved deeper, wishing to know what al-Husayni's answer implied for Palestine. Ben-Yehuda asked: "But is there one place [*maḳom eḥad*, repeating, at least in his translation, the very phrase al-Husayni had used] in the empire in which it is not desirable for Jews to settle? Let us speak directly: Is it undesirable that Jews

36 Calling upon Jewish immigrants to scatter throughout the empire was a standard Ottoman position at this time. See the reports on the visit of Ottoman parliamentarians to London in July 1909 (and note the newspaper's rejection of this Ottoman demand). "Jews and Turkey," *The Jewish Chronicle*, July 23, 1909, 4. On Ottoman perceptions of Jews as "potentially useful agents of Mediterranean commerce" and as "agents of colonial development," see Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress: Palestine on the Age of Colonial Development, 1905–1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 80.

37 Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, *Ha-Medina ha-Yehudit: Ma'amarim Shonim 'al Devar Hatsa'at Mizrah Afrika* [The Jewish state: assorted articles on the East Africa proposal] (Warsaw: Medina, 1905).

38 See, especially, the implied contrast to the challenges of settling Palestine in *ibid.*, 23–24.

continue to settle in Palestine?”³⁹ To this, al-Husayni responded: “My opinion is there is not space in this land for mass immigration [*le-viat mehagrim behamon rav*]. There is no room and the land is not prepared for it.”

Ben-Yehuda pursued the matter once again, pushing al-Husayni to articulate in detail the implications of his position, this time by calling upon al-Husayni to define his terms. “But what is the meaning of ‘mass’ [*hamon rav*]?” in “mass immigration,” Ben-Yehuda asked, noting that “this concept is not clear.” Al-Husayni reportedly replied as follows:

Of course, I am not speaking of individuals who wish to come to settle here, and not even of families, not of tens and not even of hundreds. I am speaking of mass immigration, in the tens of thousands, in the hundreds of thousands. For a mass immigration of this sort, my opinion is that there is no room in Palestine and that it will damage not only the land generally but also the Jews and the newcomers themselves. But, as I said, the settlement of individuals, of families, even of tens and hundreds, I do not see any reason not to want this, and Turkey must accept the Jews coming not en masse everywhere in the empire, with no exception.

Here, al-Husayni, addressing a Zionist Jew who had immigrated to Palestine with his wife more than two decades earlier, did not delegitimize his interviewer’s own immigration. “Tens and hundreds” – it is not clear in the text whether he meant “tens and hundreds” of individuals or of families – could still immigrate to Palestine without any problem. Through Ben-Yehuda’s probing, al-Husayni was compelled to identify a threshold number for his concern about Jewish immigration: “tens of thousands” or “hundreds of thousands.”

The conversation yielded two important conclusions that might not otherwise have emerged in this way. First, Ben-Yehuda expressed agreement in principle with al-Husayni’s reservations about concentrating Jews in one location within the Ottoman Empire. The suggestion that it might not be wise for Jews to become demographically concentrated in a single place was not to be expected from a former advocate of the East Africa proposal. On the contrary, Ben-Yehuda had been attracted to the East Africa proposal precisely because it permitted immediate Jewish demographic concentration and autonomy in a single place. One might wonder whether Ben-Yehuda expressed agreement with al-Husayni simply in order to gain a more sympathetic answer to his next question. However, this appears not to have been the case given that

39 Ben-Yehuda uses the term “Palastina” here rather than “Erets Yisrael,” as he does elsewhere in the article.

Ben-Yehuda chose to publish this agreement for his readers to see rather than omitting that sentiment from his article. It seems Ben-Yehuda actually did agree, at least in principle, with al-Husayni's concern in this regard. Second, while al-Husayni might, in other contexts, have simply stated his opposition to mass Jewish immigration to Palestine, by meeting with a Zionist Jew who had himself settled in Palestine, al-Husayni was compelled to be more precise, to identify the potentialities that truly worried him, and those that were not of real concern. In an era in which the Jewish population of Palestine had barely reached fifty thousand,⁴⁰ hearing from a Palestinian Arab political leader that there would be no opposition to the immigration of hundreds or even thousands of Jews to Palestine was, indeed, significant.

Ben-Yehuda reports that he discussed the matter further and in more detail with al-Husayni, but these more private statements were not permitted to be published. The only off-record statement Ben-Yehuda wrote was this: "Sa'id Effendi acknowledges the cultural benefit of the Jewish element in this land. With one condition: that we will all be equal, Arabs and Jews, that is, that the Jews will also be Ottomans like the Arabs, and not foreigners standing under the protection of foreign governments." Earlier that same year, Ben-Yehuda had undertaken an aggressive, four-month campaign (with the motto "Jews, be Ottomans!") to persuade Jewish immigrants to Palestine to adopt Ottoman citizenship in order to participate in Ottoman electoral politics.⁴¹ Therefore, al-Husayni's call for Jewish Ottomanization was not unwelcome, even if Ben-Yehuda's motivations were entirely different from those of his interlocutor.

"We Didn't Conquer the Land from You": Personal and National History in Conversation

As we see, a careful look at Ben-Yehuda's conversation with al-Husayni reveals far more than the latter's view that Palestine cannot "support large-scale Jewish immigration," as Mandel noted. The dynamic conversation, at least as it is recorded on the pages of *Ha-Tsevi*, compelled each participant more clearly to articulate his views and, perhaps, even to moderate them. Let us turn now to the second of the two interviews Ben-Yehuda conducted with Jerusalem's

40 See Justin McCarthy, *The Population of Palestine: Population History and Statistics of the Late Ottoman Period and the Mandate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

41 Talbot, "Jews, Be Ottomans!," 379. See also Arie Bruce Saposnik, *Becoming Hebrew: The Creation of a Jewish National Culture in Ottoman Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

parliamentarians, the interview with Ruhi al-Khalidi that took place on Saturday, October 30, 1909.⁴²

This interview, which Ben-Yehuda published on November 2, 1909, was not his first with al-Khalidi. Exactly one year earlier, soon after the Young Turk Revolution and the new parliamentary elections, Ben-Yehuda published a report on a meeting he had with al-Khalidi in the latter's "small, European salon" in Jerusalem. In this article, "An Interview with Ruhi Effendi: Our Representative in Constantinople," Ben-Yehuda described al-Khalidi in glowing terms. "Of the three representatives" of the Jerusalem province in the Ottoman parliament, "there is no doubt that Ruhi Effendi is the most interesting not only because of his past but also because of his education and the feelings that beat in his heart." Ben-Yehuda's report highlighted al-Khalidi's European orientation – "the French language and European culture greatly attracted his heart" – and his liberal approach to politics. More than once in the course of the hour-long interview, conducted in French ("Ruhi Effendi speaks beautiful, fast French," remarked Ben-Yehuda), al-Khalidi justified this liberal approach in religious terms. "Despotism is not Islamic," he told Ben-Yehuda. "On the contrary, the law [*torah*]⁴³ of Islam leans toward liberalism [*le-hafshanut*]."⁴⁴ The interview, according to Ben-Yehuda, was most congenial, as he and al-Khalidi talked and laughed. In their conversation, the two focused almost exclusively on broad, imperial matters – on the sultanate, the Young Turk Revolution, freedoms, the need for members of the old guard to continue to participate in the government, and the Shaykh al-Islam. "It would have been interesting to know what Ruhi Effendi's attitude is toward the Jews, the Arabs and the Land of Israel," Ben-Yehuda wrote at the end of his article, but they ran out of time. These matters were surely on Ben-Yehuda's mind during the interview, but raising them would clearly have altered the friendly, collegial tone; Ben-Yehuda, it seems, therefore hesitated in raising the question of Jews and Arabs in Palestine until it was too late. Al-Khalidi, however, promised that there would be another opportunity to continue the conversation.

A year later, al-Khalidi kept his promise. Ben-Yehuda reintroduced al-Khalidi in respectful terms to *Ha-Tsevi's* readers as a "modern man" (*ish ḥadish*), a politician who served as Ottoman consul in Bordeaux, and thus engaged with the political world, and who also participated in the world of

42 The record of the conversation described here is found in "Two conversations. B. My conversation with Ruhi al-Khalidi."

43 *Torah*, in this context, could alternatively be rendered "instruction."

44 Later in the interview, al-Khalidi apparently declared that "among the camp of muftis there are a great many liberals [*Hafshanim*] because the law of the Muslims is truly liberal [*hofshit*]."

letters and the academy, through his writing and research on Islam and the Arabs. According to his report, Ben-Yehuda began the conversation by telling al-Khalidi that he wished to speak with him

not only as an acquaintance and friend ever since the bad days, when we had to close the door behind us and to whisper out of fear that perhaps the spies of [Sultan] ‘Abd al-Hamid were sneaking on us and listening to our words, but also to speak with him about the status of matters in the empire generally and about issues that particularly concern us Jews.

At the start of his conversation with al-Khalidi, Ben-Yehuda highlighted their apparently long friendship and their shared loathing of the prerevolutionary order, which Ben-Yehuda called the “rule of tyranny.” Ben-Yehuda also acknowledged that the issues he was to raise were personally significant, speaking as he did not of Jews but of “us Jews [*lanu ha-yehudim*].”

As in his interview with al-Husayni the previous day, Ben-Yehuda’s first question concerned broader imperial politics, focusing especially on Grand Vizier Hilmi Pasha. Al-Khalidi was effusive in his praise of Hilmi Pasha with whom he had a close, personal relationship. Unlike al-Husayni, who saw no threat to Hilmi Pasha’s rule, however, al-Khalidi viewed the days of his governance as numbered, though he doubted there was anyone at that time who was properly prepared to succeed him. Ben-Yehuda then asked about whether Hilmi Pasha had demonstrated sufficient independence from the sultan – noting a report about Hilmi Pasha’s having exhibited excessive deference to the sultan. Al-Khalidi reminded Ben-Yehuda that the prerevolutionary ethos of submissiveness to the sultan would take time to dissolve. However, he suggested that it was not a critical problem in the independent constitutional governance of the empire. The conversation then turned to specific policies, including land taxes, policing and the postal system. Ben-Yehuda’s article offers some details about these discussions, noting that al-Khalidi continued to remind Ben-Yehuda that the parliament had only had one year of activity and that the necessary reforms would take time.

Unlike the previous year, Ben-Yehuda raised the issues that mattered most to him early in the conversation, which left sufficient time for them to be discussed. It is impossible to know the exact reason why Ben-Yehuda broached these topics in 1909 when he had failed to do so in 1908. A variety of explanations include: an increased sense of urgency about what the parliament would do concerning Zionism, his greater sense of familiarity with al-Khalidi, a heightened confidence from being in his own office rather than in al-Khalidi’s salon, or simply that he regretted not having had the conversation in 1908.

In any case, the final subject of the conversation was indeed the “difficult topic,” namely Jewish immigration to Palestine. In this more uncomfortable but most important part of the conversation, Ben-Yehuda began with the matter of the so-called “Red Note” policy limiting the length of Jews’ visits to Palestine.⁴⁵ According to his report, Ben-Yehuda did not simply ask al-Khalidi for his views on the policy; Ben-Yehuda first asserted his own perspective. “This note,” he told al-Khalidi, “is an affront to our rights as Ottoman citizens and an offense to our honor in the eyes of the people of the land.” This was Ben-Yehuda’s entry point into a broader conversation about “the matter of Jews coming here” – a subtle way of naming Zionism and Jewish immigration to Palestine. Before recounting the conversation about these issues, Ben-Yehuda notes with appreciation that al-Khalidi did not hold back his views and Ben-Yehuda deemed it important to share them with his readers “even though they are not particularly pleasant to us” (*af ‘al pi she-enam ne’imim lanu be-yoter*). It was important for his readers to learn these views, noted Ben-Yehuda, so that they knew what to expect from al-Khalidi once the issue of Zionism appeared on the parliament’s agenda.

Al-Khalidi reportedly began his response by noting that he already had an opportunity to discuss this topic in London at a dinner for Palestine’s Ottoman parliamentarians hosted by “the Zionists,” “led by Sir Claude Montefiore.” (This meeting was actually hosted by Francis Abraham Montefiore, honorary chairman of the English Zionist Federation; Claude Montefiore was not a Zionist but rather an avowed anti-Zionist Anglo-Jew, as will be discussed below.)⁴⁶ Then al-Khalidi presented his assessment of the problem:

45 On the *tazkra* or Red Note (sometimes rendered Red Paper or Red Slip) policy that limited Jews’ visits to Palestine generally to three months, see Gur Alroey, *An Unpromising Land: Jewish Migration to Palestine in the Early Twentieth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 131–32; Mandel, *The Arabs and Zionism*, 15. The policy was abolished, at least in name, in 1913. As Mandel notes, “the Ottoman Government had abolished the Red Slip to please the Jews, and retained the other restrictions so as not to displease the Arabs.” See *ibid.*, 169–70.

46 *The Jewish Chronicle* of London reported that this Saturday luncheon was hosted by Francis Montefiore and welcomed “Talaat Bey (President of the Deputation), Nissim Mazliah Effendi (Secretary), Dr. Riza Tewfik Bey, Sassoon Eskill Effendi and Ruhil (sic) Khalidi Bey (member for Jerusalem).” The newspaper report does not mention al-Khalidi’s contributions to the discussion. See “Zionism: The Turkish Delegates and the Zionist Movement,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, July 30, 1909, 21. On this lunch meeting, see Mandel, *The Arabs and Zionism*, 74–75. For the Montefiore family tree, see Joseph Jacobs et al., “Montefiore,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*, www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10960-montefiore.

In general, I think that the brotherhood and closeness between Jews and Arabs is most natural and most desired. Are we not truly brothers – close in family, spirit, religion, and language, and also somewhat in history. However, I do not see on the side of the Jews, especially among the Ashkenazic Jews, an inclination to come closer to us.⁴⁷ I see the Germans, for example, or the Americans [in Palestine] approaching us. The Jews, and especially the Ashkenazic Jews, are an entirely different world and they do not come in contact with us.

Sitting in Ben-Yehuda's office, al-Khalidi told his Ashkenazi Jewish interlocutor that despite the natural affinities between Jews and Arabs, Palestine's Ashkenazic Jews were keeping the communities apart and squandering the possibilities of Jewish integration and acculturation among the Arabs.⁴⁸ In contrast, even though they lacked such innate connections with the Arabs, the Germans (presumably he had in mind the Templars) and the Americans who had established colonies in Palestine had become better incorporated into broader Arab society.

Interestingly, al-Khalidi agreed with Ben-Yehuda that the "Red Note" policy should be cancelled. In fact, al-Khalidi claimed, he had just spoken about this matter the previous day with Subhi Bey, the Ottoman governor of Jerusalem, who shared this view.⁴⁹ As al-Khalidi put it, "for individual Jews, the gates of the land must certainly be open, without interference. However, to establish Jewish colonies – this is a different question." Al-Khalidi was speaking here to a Jew who moved to Palestine as an individual, with his family, and who had settled in the city of Jerusalem rather than a separate Jewish colony. Al-Khalidi did not seem especially worried about offending his interviewer, openly blaming Ashkenazi Jews for tensions between Palestine's Arabs and Jews.

Al-Khalidi's insistence on the distinction between individuals and groups was part of a broader liberal discourse in the fin-de-siècle Ottoman Empire. It likely had particular resonance with him following his years of study,

47 *Le-hitkarev elenu* would seem to mean something like "integration" or "acculturation."

48 This statement strikes me as an early case of the generally self-serving and self-fulfilling, though never entirely disprovable trope of "*ein partner le-shalom*" (there is no partner for peace). On the other hand, especially as their numbers increased and social interaction with non-Jews was less essential for day-to-day life, there were undoubtedly ways in which non-Arabic speaking European Jews were less integrated than other minority populations among Palestinian Arab society. See, for example, Glenn Bowman, "Sharing and Exclusion: The Case of Rachel's Tomb," *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 58 (2014): 41–43.

49 On Subhi Bey's position concerning Jewish immigration, see Mandel, *The Arabs and Zionism*, 73; Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*, 219–20.

scholarship, and political activity in France. It was in France 120 years earlier, that the Count of Clermont-Tonnerre famously declared in the National Assembly that “the Jews should be denied everything as a nation, but granted everything as individuals.”⁵⁰ This statement regarding the limits of toleration in the modern liberal state was echoed in the position al-Khalidi articulated in this conversation. Moreover, if the mention of Claude (instead of Francis) Montefiore in Ben-Yehuda’s article was more than an accident, and al-Khalidi had in fact met also with Claude during his visit to London, then he would have encountered a passionate advocate for the “denationalization of Judaism.” The founder of England’s Liberal Judaism movement, Claude Montefiore asserted that he was “an Englishman of the Jewish persuasion.”⁵¹ Al-Khalidi’s conversation with Ben-Yehuda in Palestine was thus informed by previous conversations with other Jews in Paris, Bordeaux, and London.

As he continued his response to Ben-Yehuda’s assertion that Jews’ rights were violated through the “Red Note” visa limitations, al-Khalidi turned to what he viewed as a violation of Arab rights. In this instance, however, the tool was not law but economic inequality. “The Jews have the financial ability,” noted al-Khalidi, “and are able to buy much land and evict the Arabs from their land and the inheritance of their ancestors.” Just as Jewish rights were abused by Ottoman law, Arab rights were ravaged through the exploitation of economic privation.

If al-Khalidi said more on this matter, Ben-Yehuda chose not to record it. Instead, what immediately follows, presented as the final part of al-Khalidi’s response to Ben-Yehuda’s opening question about Jewish immigration, is one of the most fascinating statements of the late Ottoman Arab–Zionist encounter: “We conquered the land not from you [*anu kavashnu et ha-arets lo mikem*].

50 Paul R. Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 115.

51 Quotes from “Zionism” entry in *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 10, 665. See Geoffrey Alderman, “English Jews or Jews of the English Persuasion? Reflections on the Emancipation of Anglo-Jewry,” in *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States, and Citizenship*, ed. Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 138. On Montefiore, See Claude G. Montefiore, *Liberal Judaism: An Essay* (London: Macmillan, 1903); Edward Kessler, ed., *An English Jew: The Life and Writings of Claude Montefiore* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2002). Later, in 1916, Claude Montefiore would write that “the Jewish religion destroyed the Jewish nation many centuries ago” and that Zionism was “a very dangerous movement” that could “even imperil” Jewish emancipation. “No wonder,” he wrote, “that all anti-Semites are enthusiastic Zionists.” See “An Englishman of the Jewish Faith [Montefiore],” “Zionism,” *Fortnightly Review* (November 1916), 819–26. I learned of this pseudonymous article in Jonathan Schneer, *The Balfour Declaration: The Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (New York: Random House, 2012), 305.

We conquered it from the Byzantines who were ruling it then. We owe nothing to the Jews [*ein anu hayavim kelum le-ha-yehudim*]. The Jews were not here at the time that we conquered the land ...”⁵² Here, al-Khalidi implicitly acknowledged something that he later made explicit in a manuscript he wrote on the subject of Zionism – *Al-Sayunizm, ay al-mas’ala al-Sahyuniyya* (Zionism or the Zionist Question)⁵³ – namely that the Jews *had been* in Palestine *before* the Arabs or Muslims. The Jews’ return, however, could not be seen as the righting of a historical injustice. Those who were currently living in Palestine (that is, the Arab population), and who were, as al-Khalidi saw it, being financially ejected from their lands, were not the descendants of those who took Palestine from the ancient Jews. If we follow al-Khalidi’s logic, the situation would be entirely different were the descendants of the Byzantines to attempt to resettle in Palestine. To the Jews, though, Arabs and Muslims “owe nothing,” as the Jews were no longer in Palestine, or at least were no longer ruling Palestine and populating it *en masse* when the Arab Muslim forces arrived and conquered it in the seventh century.

Sometimes what is omitted from a dialogue can reveal as much as what is included. After hearing such a fundamental challenge to the historical justice of Zionism, Ben-Yehuda apparently did not tackle it. He responded passionately, but, as far as his account tells us, only to al-Khalidi’s accusations regarding the impact of Zionist land purchases on Palestine’s peasant farmers. “But, sir,” Ben-Yehuda retorted, “up until now, the Jews have purchased almost no property from the fellahin.” He elaborated:

Up to this point, they have only purchased from particular individuals who owned the land and, mostly, whose families owned the land for decades even before the Jews arrived here. What harm did the Jews cause to the fellahin in doing this? On the contrary, haven’t the fellahin in the areas surrounding the Jewish colonies been enriched? Haven’t the Jews been a model? Haven’t the fellahin learned from the Jews advanced methods of agriculture that have improved their conditions?

52 Ellipsis in original.

53 On this manuscript, see Walid al-Khalidi, “Kitab al-sayunizm aw al-mas’ala al-sahyuniyya li-Muhammad Ruhi al-Khalidi al-mutawaffa sanat 1913” [The Book *Zionism or the Zionist Question* by Muhammad Ruhi al-Khalidi, who died in 1913], in *Dirasat Filastiniyya: Majmu’at abhath wadi’at takriman li-l-duktur Qastantin Zurayq* [Palestinian studies: a collection of studies dedicated in honor of Dr. Constantin Zurayq], ed. Hisham Nashshabah (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1988); and Jonathan Marc Gribetz, “Reading Mendelssohn in Late Ottoman Palestine: An Islamic Theory of Jewish Secularism,” in *Secularism in Question: Jews and Judaism in Modern Times*, ed. Ari Joskowicz and Ethan Katz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

The Jews, according to Ben-Yehuda, primarily purchased land from wealthy landowners rather than from fellahin. For Ben-Yehuda this meant that the Zionists could not have harmed the fellahin.⁵⁴ Rather, the opposite was the case: the fellahin had in fact substantially benefited from Zionist immigration – both from increased employment opportunities and from the more efficient agricultural methods they learned from the Jewish immigrants. Just as previous Jewish immigration had not hurt the fellahin, further immigration would only improve the lives of Palestine's Arab peasants. "This land [*arets*] still has a great deal of land [*karka'ot*] in the hands of rich individuals, [land] from which the Arab fellahin have no benefit," contended Ben-Yehuda. "These lands will suffice for many, many Jewish colonies. And what harm," asked Ben-Yehuda rhetorically, "will this Jewish settlement bring even to the fellahin, let alone to the land [as a whole]? Are not the Jewish colonies [net] income for the state [*medina*]? Are they not bringing new life to the land and to the fellahin?" Ben-Yehuda articulated a broad defense of both the ethics of Zionist land purchases and the positive effects of these practices on Palestine's Arab peasant farming population and, more generally, on the region. Despite this, he apparently chose not to answer al-Khalidi's more basic challenge to Zionism, that the Arabs "conquered the land not from you."

For al-Khalidi, this challenge to the historical legitimacy of the Zionist enterprise mattered and could not be ignored. Thus al-Khalidi could at once reply to Ben-Yehuda that "of course, I do not deny this," that is, the material benefits brought by Zionism to Palestine's population, and at the same time conclude that "in any case, we will definitely take the necessary measures to prevent the [fulfillment] of the Zionists' big ideas ..." ⁵⁵ It is not clear which "big ideas" al-Khalidi had in mind. It could have been the historical justification of Zionism, increased immigration, broader colonization, autonomy, or statehood; what is certain is that each of these ideas was important to al-Khalidi. He may have said more about this but all we have is an ellipsis. The conversation apparently then ended, when al-Khalidi's assistant entered to announce it was time for the parliamentarian's next appointment.

54 Even some Zionists in Palestine disagreed with Ben-Yehuda's assessment. This was precisely the problem Yitshak Epstein addressed in his critical essay "Hidden Question" two years earlier. Yitshak Epstein, "She'ela Na'alama" [The hidden question] *Ha-Shiloah* 17 (July–December 1907), 193–206. For an English translation and commentary, see Alan Dowty, "A Question That Outweighs All Others": Yitzhak Epstein and Zionist Recognition of the Arab Issue," *Israel Studies* 6, no. 1 (2001): 34–54.

55 Ellipsis in original.

Time Frames and City Limits

At the end of his presentation of the second interview, Ben-Yehuda declares that he reported the conversation exactly as it took place. “I think that there is no use in closing [our] eyes and stopping [our] ears,” he explained. Rather, “it is necessary to know the situation as it is.” The respective encounters between Ben-Yehuda, on the one hand, and al-Husayni and al-Khalidi, on the other, were not merely informational. Ben-Yehuda was not simply curious about what the parliamentarians thought; as we have seen, he wished also to engage with them, to persuade them, and they responded in kind. In other words, while Ben-Yehuda asserted the necessity of “know[ing] the situation as it is,” conversation, as such, was also meant to alter that very situation. It is worth considering the extent to which such conversations might actually have informed and influenced their participants rather than merely offering them a forum in which to articulate their positions. In this regard, I would highlight two underlying aspects of these conversations.

First, notwithstanding the tensions and opposing interests between the communities represented by Ben-Yehuda, on the one hand, and al-Husayni and al-Khalidi, on the other, these intellectual and political leaders were willing to speak to one another. Moreover, the act of conversation and what was learned during it appear to have had an impact. In the course of conversation, each expressed positions that many in their own communities would likely have rejected. Al-Husayni told Ben-Yehuda that he believed Palestine could comfortably welcome many more Jewish immigrants (though not tens or hundreds of thousands), and Ben-Yehuda told al-Husayni that he agreed that it would be best for Jews to settle widely in the Ottoman Empire, not only in Palestine. Al-Khalidi, for his part, expressed openness to the immigration of Jews (but not to separate Jewish colonies) and acknowledged the material benefits Jewish immigration had brought to Palestine, while Ben-Yehuda seems to have accepted al-Khalidi’s assertion that because they did not conquer Palestine from the Jews, the Arabs “owe nothing to the Jews.” These are not positions, one suspects, that any of these three individuals would likely have embraced in solitude or among their own communities.⁵⁶ These are perspectives that emerged in and through conversation.

⁵⁶ When Zionists in London were confronted with the demand that Jews not concentrate in any one place in the Ottoman Empire, *The Jewish Chronicle* replied forcefully: “the fear that concentration of Jews within the Empire would create a Jewish question is really untenable. Our Turkish guests ignore the fact that, in a sense, a Jewish question has long existed and must always exist in Turkey. While Jewish sentiment, the world over, clings

The fact that these conversations happened in Jerusalem, a city, is significant. Modern cities can promote social segmentation, isolation, and anomie, but they can also permit interaction and engagement across social borders. Vincent Lemire regards the cultivation of “living-together” as the “hallmark of all urban culture.”⁵⁷ The shared city, however, can permit more than “living-together”; in the case of late Ottoman Jerusalem, it offered the possibility of “speaking-together,” of learning about the neighbor and revising one’s perspective not only on the Other’s needs and ambitions but also on one’s own. These conversations in late Ottoman Jerusalem are illuminating examples of this latter potential in *citadinité*.

However, there can be limits: even when speaking to one another, these men were not always having the same conversation. We saw this most clearly in the encounter between Ben-Yehuda and al-Khalidi on the issue of the morality of Zionist immigration. In this instance, al-Khalidi was concerned with long-term rights and obligations based in history.⁵⁸ In contrast, Ben-Yehuda focused on contemporary, mundane economics. This disconnect, I would note, is common in the history of the Arab–Zionist encounter, though not always along the same lines. When Zionists speak in the long term, for example, of rights emanating from their ancestors’ historic presence in the ancient Land of Israel, Arabs may speak in the short term: “who cares about ancient history? Look what’s happening right now!” As we see with al-Khalidi and Ben-Yehuda, the inverse is true as well. When the Arab leader al-Khalidi spoke with the long view, the Zionist Ben-Yehuda responded with the shorter and more mundane view: “who cares about the seventh century? Look what’s happening right now!”

The underlying question was (and, we might say, remains): when is the starting point for telling the history of Jerusalem? Does the history that truly matters for today start with the Jebusites? David and Solomon? The Babylonians?

affectionately and tenaciously to the ancient land of promise, while Jews are ready to make personal sacrifices in order to be knit to the soil, whether in life or in death, so long a Jewish question awaits the hand of wise and competent statesmanship. Wise and competent statesmanship would not seek to close its eyes to the question or, in face of palpable facts, deny it ... Let the Jews come in, let them concentrate in the country, let them even control the local Government – of course subject to their becoming Ottoman subjects.” See “Jews and Turkey,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, July 23, 1909, 6.

57 See the conclusion in Lemire, *Jerusalem 1900*.

58 On al-Khalidi’s historical interests, see also Nasir al-Din al-Asad, *Muhammad Ruhi al-Khalidi: ra’id al-bahth al-tarikhi al-hadith fi Filastin* [Muhammad Ruhi al-Khalidi: pioneer of modern historical research in Palestine] (Cairo: Ma’had al-Buhuth wa-l-Dirasat al-‘Arabiyya, 1970); Beška, “Anti-Zionist Attitudes and Activities of Ruhi al-Khalidi,” 182.

Cyrus? Herod? Jesus? Constantine and Helena? Muhammad? Umar? The Crusades? Saladin? Suleiman I? The students of Elijah of Vilna? The independent *mutaşşarıflık*? Hibbat Zion? Or something else? The particular beginning one chooses in recounting the relevant history of the city (discounting that which preceded as irrelevant prehistory or trivia) can do more to determine the imputed meaning and implications of that history than any event recorded (or ignored) along the way. In this 1909 Arab–Zionist conversation, the problem of time framing – when to start the narrative – was already evident.

If substantive Arab–Zionist conversation was already challenging in the late Ottoman period, it is, of course, even more so after the century of violence and destruction that has since ensued. And yet today such conversations are all the more crucial and urgent.