CHAPTER 15

Arab–Zionist Conversations in Late Ottoman Jerusalem: Sa‘id 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].

EMMANUEL LÉVINAS

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. In this chapter, I analyze accounts of two such conversations that took place in Jerusalem in 1909 and were recorded


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*. 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. 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-Ẓevi*.” 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.” 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

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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.
