

Whose Acre?

THE ANCIENT port of Acre is now the object of a fierce battle. The Arab inhabitants of the town want the port to bear the name of an Arab hero, Issa al Awam, a general under Saladin, the Muslim leader who defeated the Crusaders. The municipality of Acre, which of course is dominated by the Jewish inhabitants, has decided to give the port the name of an Israeli functionary.

The Arab citizens set up a monument for their hero. The municipality declared it to be an "illegal structure" and decided to destroy it.

This could have been a small local conflict, one of many in this mixed and quarrelsome town, if it did not have such profound ideological and political implications.

I LOVE old Acre. For me, it is the most beautiful and interesting town in the country, after East Jerusalem.

It is one of the most ancient towns in the country, perhaps in the whole world. It is mentioned in the Bible in the first chapter of Judges (which, by the way, completely contradicts the genocidal Book of Joshua.) The chapter enumerates the Canaanite towns which were not conquered by the Children of Israel. It remained a Phoenician town, one of the port towns from which intrepid Hebrew-speaking sailors went forth and colonized the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, from Tyre to Carthage.

The fortunes of Acre reached their zenith during the times of the Crusaders. It was then the only port in the country that could be used during all the seasons of the year. The Crusaders succeeded in taking it after a stubborn defense. A hundred years later, when the great Salah-ad-Din (Saladin) put an end to the Crusaders' rule in Jerusalem, he drove them out of Acre, too. The Knights of the Cross recaptured it, and for another hundred years it served as the capital of the reduced Crusader state. In 1291, when the remnants of the Crusader kingdom were wiped out, Acre was the last Crusader town to fall to the Muslims. The image of the last Crusaders and their women jumping from the quays of Acre has been engraved in the memory of the age and has given birth to the expression still current: "to throw into the sea".

Later, too, the town had a checkered history. A Bedouin chieftain, Daher al-Omar, took it over and created a kind of independent semi-state of Galilee. Even Napoleon, one of the Great Captains of history, came from Egypt in 1799 and laid siege to it, but was roundly defeated by the Arabs, with the help of British sailors.

When the British became the lords of the land in 1917, they turned the imposing Crusader fortress of Acre into a prison, in which the leaders of the Hebrew underground organizations, among others, were incarcerated. In one of its most daring exploits, the

Irgun broke into the fortress and freed its prisoners. In 1947, the Israeli army conquered the town, which was until then entirely Arab.

The ancient part of the town, with its beautiful minarets and Crusader fortifications, continued to be Arab. So did the port, which now serves fishermen. But around this quarter, Jewish neighborhoods have sprung up, faceless like many hundreds of such neighborhoods throughout Israel, and their inhabitants now constitute the majority. They do not like their Arab neighbors very much.

From time to time, quarrels break out between the two populations. The Arab inhabitants believe that Acre has been their town since ancient times and consider the Jews intruders. The Jews are convinced that the town belongs to them and that the Arabs are, at best, a tolerated minority that should shut up.

The current dispute can well turn violent.

IN EVERY conflict between Jews and Arabs in this country, the rather childish question arises: Who was here first?

The Arabs conquered the country, which they then called Jund Filistin (military district Palestine) in 635 AD, and since then it has been under Muslim rule (apart from the Crusader period) until the arrival of the British. They claim "We were first".

The Zionist version is different. In Biblical times, most of the country belonged to the kingdoms of Judea and Israel, even though the coast belonged to the Phoenicians in the North and the Philistines in the South. (In spite of all the frantic efforts of a hundred years, no archaeological evidence has been found that there ever was an exodus from Egypt, a conquest of Canaan by the Children of Israel or a kingdom of David and Solomon.) Since the kingdom of Ahab, around 870 BC, Israel has been on the well-attested historical map. After the Babylonian exile, the Jews dominated parts of the country, with constantly changing borders, until Roman times. Ergo: "We were first".

If the Israelites were here before the Muslims, who was here before the Israelites? The Canaanites, of course. "They were first". But who represents them?

I once wrote a satirical piece about the "First Canaanite Congress" which takes place somewhere in the world. The participants declare that they are the descendents of the original inhabitants of the country and claim it for themselves.

That is not entirely a joke. In the first years of the last century Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, who was to become the second president of Israel, tried to harness the Canaanites to Zionism. He researched and found that the population of this country has not really changed from the earliest times. The Canaanites mixed with the Israelites, became Jews and Hellenists, and when the Byzantine empire, which then ruled this country, adopted Christianity, they too became Christians. After the Muslim conquest, they gradually became Arabs.

In other words, the same village was Canaanite, became Israelite, passed through all the stages and in the end,

became Arab. Nowadays it is Palestinian, unless it was wiped out in 1948 and replaced by an Israeli settlement. Throughout, the population did not really change. Many of the place names did not change either. Every new conqueror brought with him a new set of beliefs and a new elite, but the population itself did not change much. No conqueror was interested in driving out the inhabitants, who provided him with food and revenue. In the opinion of Ben-Zvi, the Palestinian Arabs are really the descendents of the ancient Israelites. But when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict gathered momentum, this theory was forgotten.

Recently, some Palestinians adopted a rather similar theory. By the same historical logic, they claim that the Palestinian Arabs are the descendents of the ancient Canaanites, and therefore “they were first”, even before the Children of Israel of Biblical times. It was only the Zionist conquest that, for the first time in history, radically changed the composition of the population.

The Canaanites and the ancient Israelites spoke different dialects of the same Semitic language, which is nowadays called Hebrew. Later on, Aramaic became the language of the country, and later on Arabic. Last week, new research was published, showing that the vernacular Syrian-Palestinian Arabic dialect includes many words that have their origin in ancient Hebrew and Aramaic, and which do not appear in the dialect of other Arab countries. Clearly, they were absorbed by the native Arab dialect many centuries ago. They are mainly day-to-day agricultural words, and it is logical to assume that they entered the Arabic language from the Aramaic that it replaced.

WHY IS that important? How does it affect the Acre dispute?

Many years ago I read a book by the late American-Arab scholar, Philip Hitti, a Maronite Christian from Lebanon, entitled “History of Syria”. According to the Arab historical view, Syria (a-Sham in classical Arabic) includes today’s Syria as well as well as present-day Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The book made a lasting impression on me. It recounts the history of this country from prehistoric times to the present, with all its stages, as one continuous story, which includes Canaanites and Israelites, Phoenicians and Philistines, Aramaeans and Arabs, Crusaders and Mamluks, Turks and Britons, Muslims, Christians and Jews. They all belong to the history of the country, all of them contributed to its culture, language and architecture, palaces and fortresses, synagogues and churches, mosques and cemeteries.

Anyone thinking about peace and reconciliation should absorb this picture.

WHAT KIND of history is taught now in the schools of the two peoples? Both have a mobile history which is wandering about the landscape.

Jewish history starts with “Abraham Our Father” in present-day Iraq and the exodus from Egypt, the receiving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai in present-day Egypt, the Conquest of Canaan, King David and the other legends of the Bible, which are taught as actual history. It continues in the country until the destruction of the Temple by Titus and the Bar Kokhba rebellion against the Romans, when it goes into “exile”, concentrating on the chain of expulsions and persecutions, only returning to the country with the early Zionist settlers.

This history ignores not only all that happened in the country before the Israelite era, but also everything that happened during the 1747 years between the Bar Kokhba uprising in 135 AD and the start of the pre-Zionist settlement in 1882. An alumnus of the Israeli education system knows next to nothing about the country during these eras.

On the Arab side, things are no better. The Palestinian-Arab historical picture starts in the Arab peninsula with the advent of the Prophet Mohammad, mentioning the era of Jahiliyah (“ignorance”) before that, and comes to Palestine with the Muslim conquerors. What happened here before 635 AD does not interest it.

The pupils of these two education systems – the Jewish-Israeli and the Palestinian-Arab – grow up with two entirely different historical narratives.

I DREAM of the day when in every school in this country, in Israel and in Palestine, Jews and Arabs will learn not only these two histories, but also the complete history of the country which includes all the periods and cultures.

They will learn, for example, that when the crusaders invaded the country, Muslims and Jews stood together against the cruel invader and were massacred together. They will learn that in Haifa, the local Jews led the defense and were admired for their heroism, until they were slaughtered side by side with the Muslims. Such identification with the history of the country can serve as a solid basis for a reconciliation between the peoples.

A dozen years ago, inspired by the unforgettable Feisal al-Husseini, I drew up a Manifesto on Jerusalem for Gush Shalom. One of its paragraphs reads: “Our Jerusalem is a mosaic of all the cultures, all the religions and all the periods that enriched the city, from earliest antiquity to this very day – Canaanites and Jebusites and Israelites, Jews and Hellenes, Romans and Byzantines, Christians and Muslims, Arabs and Mamluks, Ottomans and Britons, Palestinians and Israelis. They and all the others who made their contribution to the city have a place in the spiritual and physical landscape of Jerusalem.”

In this list, the Crusaders are missing, and not by mistake. They were in our original text. But when I asked the renowned Arab-Israeli writer Emil Habibi to be the first to sign, he exclaimed: “I shall not sign any document that mentions these abominable murderers!”

Almost everything that can be said about Jerusalem is true for Acre, too. Its history is also continuous from prehistoric times until today, and the Arab general Issa al Awam belongs to it as much as the English Crusader Richard the Lionheart and the Etzel fighters who broke the prison walls.