

Jewish Textual Architectures

Jewish Spaces, Places, and Architectures in Literature. Online Anthology

Palestine and the world of tomorrow by Eric Mendelsohn, F.R.I.B.A. Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects

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Source Description and Interpretation	A Semitic commonwealth of Jews and Arabs. Erich Mendelsohn's observations, reflections, and advice for the future of Palestine in 1940 (Regina Stephan)

Source Description

The author of the text is the architect Erich Mendelsohn (1887–1953) from Allenstein, East Prussia. He emigrated from Germany in March 1933. In the same year, he founded new offices in London and in 1935 in Jerusalem, between which he travelled. The short text (18.5 p.) published by Jerusalem Press Ltd. in Palestine, then a British Mandate, in an unknown edition has no illustrations. It was published in February 1940, when Mendelsohn was living in Palestine with his wife. They had left London in the early summer of 1939 due to the recognizable threat of war. However, the situation in Palestine was also difficult. Mendelsohn's building projects suffered from the Arab uprising between 1936 and 1939. In September 1939, the German Wehrmacht invaded Poland, starting the Second World War. The following month, the British Mandate government imposed a ban on immigration to Palestine. The 53-year-old architect, who had already visited Palestine for the first time in 1923, when there were still far fewer European immigrants living in the country, wrote the text at a politically extremely turbulent time. He starts the text with a review of 6,000 years of history of the Mediterranean and its neighbors. In his view, Ottoman rule led to the decline of Palestine, which is nevertheless “the only solution to the perpetual conundrum” facing European Jews today. However, he notes that Palestine is not an uninhabited country, but on the contrary part of the Arab world. Therefore, the fate of Palestine depends on Jews and Arabs seeing themselves as members of the common Semitic family and developing the country together. It is a demand towards both sides.

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Transcription

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"It seems to be no matter of mere chance but rather natural, that it is the architect - accustomed to the conception of a building as the sum total of all the requirements of his time - who should be among the first to realize the change in the structure of the world because he feels the structural element to be his own personal prerogative."

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FOR 6000 years the Mediterranean was the scene of man's history - politically, economically and spiritually

History therefore calls the countries surrounding or neighbouring that sea the "cradles of civilization".

Egypt invented the Alphabet 1500 years before writing became known in Greece:- it measured the course of the year through the institution of the Calendar, through the invention of the shadow-clock the hours of the day. It learned to use metal 2000 years before that knowledge was introduced into England.

It discovered the principles of mathematics and geometry which form the basis of modern science and technology.

The Phoenicians invented a coinage: through the invention of maps worked out the connections between sea and land, and laid the foundations of world-trade 2500 years before America was discovered. They established an universal economy and world-wide traffic through their merchant-navy and their system of exchange.

By the ten commandments, Judaea created the moral law, Italy through her Codex Romanus created the civil-law of the modern world.

Greece made the scale of her art proportionate to the scale of man and obtained through the simultaneous creation of her philosophy and dramatic poetry the honorary title of the 'mother of European culture'.

For 400 years the Mediterranean basin retained its place as

master of the world. It was the centre of interest around which the ambitions of ancient empires revolved - to become the object of world politics only after the World across the seas was discovered, to become the borderland of the World's interest after the machine was invented. The discovery of India and the opening of the Suez Canal converted its former dominant position as the terminus of World trade into an unimportant trade route to the Far East, running through various zones of foreign influence.

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For the dawn of modern technology makes the exportation of natural products more important than the importation of spiritual values.

Spiritual values become of subordinate interest.

One is fond of them as one is fond of inherited property, that has some sentimental value but yields no profit.

One admires them, because one has no alternative of one's own. One takes little care of them, because they represent an useless burden.

Finally, when technology obtains control over men the Mediterranean becomes a lock between two oceans, the Atlantic and the Indian.

The principal domain of spiritual culture declines to an accidental market of technical civilization.

As a historic site it remains an object of study and pilgrimage - a resort for intellectuals impoverished by the machine, for the bourgeois enriched by the machine.

These are the guests of the Mediterranean, on whom it waits because it lives on them.

The Mediterranean peoples who once used to rule become a fluid mass of 'Levantine'.

Levantinism is the consequence of the diminished interest of the World in the creative realm of art and religion.

Levantinism means the dumping place for the residue of industrial production and scientific invention.

It means the degradation of independent speculation to intellectual dependency and the surrender of personality and creative power. The Mediterranean peoples get no profit from the exploitation of their enigmatic splendour for the sake of the Europe-American Pseudostyles. They sell the copyright of

their genuine creations for the tips left behind by romantic artists, snobs and eager archaeologists.

They get no royalties for their unique creations, being listed into a pattern book of architectural details and decorations.

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The mismanagement and exploitation of their forests leads to the sterilization of the mountains of Greece and the hills of Judaea. The arrogance that despises those who prefer spiritual benediction to the blessings of technology, leads to the sterilization of human endeavour.

The decline of the creative power of the Mediterranean and the loss of its political importance are in close and continuous relation to each other.

Palestine is only a part of this process.

In historic times, Palestine was a perpetual highway for the nations ruling the Mediterranean. its history is tied up with the fate of those great empires.

The remains of its Architecture and Art reflect these manifold invasions and their influence upon its civilization.

Jehovah's temple on Mt. Moriah was a true reflection of a culture moulded by Babylon, Egypt and Minoan Crete.

Even the spirituality of the Jewish religion had to give way once and again to that dynamic pressure. And when Rome reached the climax of her political power, Judaea's oriental monotheism was destroyed to secure Rome's spiritual predominance.

Under the Roma Empire the eastern border states of the Mediterranean formed the Empire's most distant province.

Hence strong military outposts and magnificent display: Baalbek and Palmyra in Syria, Jerash and Petra in Trans-Jordan, Caesarea on the coast and Aelia Capitolina, Jerusalem was then called, in the heart of Palestine.

All typical examples of a grandiose but uncreative provincial civilization.

But the 'limes' of the Empire on the border of the desert had a profound significance. It demonstrated - like the Great Wall in China and the Maginot Line of today - that the great nations had reached their natural limits and the world had outlived its old order.

Early Christendom was as constructive in its art as it was functional in its faith. As a new dogma it is eager for

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combat, aggressive and dynamic - because it is an offspring of the border of the desert it shows in itself striking differences. It enriches the simplicity of life on earth by the promise of an ample life in heaven. Hence the severity of the blank walls of its churches contrasting with the heavenly colours of its ikons and mosaics: the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem. Hence the contrast between the mystical interior and the radiance of the Savior's tomb: the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. The Moslem is entirely the child of the desert. He longs for the Oasis, hence his belief in paradise as an eternal oasis in the life to come after the barren sands of his life on earth. He values the power of nature higher than human energy. Hence his fatalism resulting from the endless glare of the sun. He values the riches of phantasy higher than technical inventions. That is why his architectural creations are not constructive but abound in richly coloured materials like desert spring flowers suddenly rising after the first winter-rain: the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem - a lily of the desert; the Alhambra at Cordoba - a purple orchid. Islam starts as a spiritual movement and grows to world mastery in the Holy War under the prophet Muhammad's banner. But its political power - lasting for hardly 200 years - is temporary like the trance of eastern temperament. The Crusades are the decisive battles over Islam for the sake of Christianity as World-religion. The Knights of the Cross spread the seed of oriental origin, out of which grows the medieval Christian order of Europe which has been shaken by the forces let loose by the French Revolution and is threatened only today by the new forces of Atheism. The Convents and Cathedrals all over Europe signify its artistic zenith. Palestine has experienced the domination of all three powers and has absorbed their influences:

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the destructive power of the most distant Roman province,

alien to its race

the constructive power of the early Christendom, originating

from Jewish soil and spirit, and

the vegetative power of the Islam as image of its own nature.
The decay of Palestine under Turkish rule reached its lowest level at the time and under the influence of the spiritual decline of Europe.

This spiritual decline is part of the so-called "Industrial Revolution" of the 19th Century, the significance of which is visible and comprehensible to us only today.

Technology established the predominance of the materialistic conception of life, that puts the question for life's purpose above life itself. An utilitarianism which destroys the essence of life based upon the unity of mind and matter.

With the help of the machine man expected to overcome the powers of Nature and by that victory to discover its secret. That is why he trusts the glaring clarity of the intellect and the inventions it has produced; and despises the chiaroscuro of the unconscious spirit, the root of the creative power in man.

But the machine does not follow him, it strikes at him with his own weapons and makes him its helpless victim.

The machine destroys the balance between production and consumption, between the volume of work available and the number of hands required.

Social and political tension arise as a result of unemployment.

Political tension leads to war - social discord to revolt.

Extreme conceptions clash together.

Such apposing forces undermine civilization, and drive the world to chaos.

The present war forces the world to a fundamental reorganization, its indispensability being visible and comprehensible not only to the initiated.

Out of the hotch-potch of nations of the 19th Century -

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out of the national narrowness of the decades preceeding the war man is able to create the new structure of our the 20th Century:

Nations of common descent to unite to great racial entites -

National economic systems depending on each other to become partners of great economcis units -

Economic entities to have equal right within a world wide

clearing-house.

Let abolish both the error of economic autarchy and the economic confusion caused by unrestricted competition, let machine be a tool in the hand of man for the benefit of all, let man himself serve nature. Then matter and spirit will once again be an organic unity.

Within the new world-order the Jewish people ought to find their just and proper place.

Their legal emancipation in the 19th Century stirred up their hope to be at one with the nations among whom they dwelt; but owing to the nationalist and racial hatreds of the last decades this hope proved to be delusive.

There is no final solution in the proposal to transfer the Jews as a national entity to some place or another. Nor is it practical for them to be absorbed in groups by other countries. For that they are too large a number; for that they have too strong a national feeling, based on an undying belief in the prophecies of the Bible. Thus Palestine is the only solution of their 'everlasting riddle'.

The return of the Jews to Palestine, to the country of their historic origin, was bound to lead them to hope for a State of their own.

This hope awoke their idealism and made fertile again the soil of Palestine untilled for centuries.

The first five decades of Zionist colonization tell the epic battle to bring that national idea into being.

But the new war of today will prove the conception of an Independent State to be too narrow. The war forces the Jewish people too, after centuries of spiritual constraint

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and physical persecution, to recognize the task of our century and to apply it for their own benefit.

Palestine is not an uninhabited country. On the contrary, it forms a part of the Arabian world.

The problem that confronts the Jew in Palestine is how to reach equal rank among his neighbours; how to become a cell of the future Semitic commonwealth, to which they in fact belong by their race, tongue and character.

It is for the statesmen of the world to prepare that solution; For the return of the Jews to Palestine will give them the blessing of liberty and will free the world at last of the nightmare of pogroms.

The return of the Jews signifies an exceptional event in the

march of man with which the return of the Jews from their Baylonian bondage cannot be compared.

The captivity in Babylon was a short one, brought nearly the whole of Jewry to a country not very different from their own and welded together the Jewish tribes to a nationally and spiritually united Jewish nation.

The second dispersion of the Jews from Palestine lasted nearly 2000 years, one third of the total of man's written history. it scattered the Jewish people to all the corners of the world and broke up the unity of their national character and mentality.

That dismemberment makes comprehensible the attitude of the Jews towards the problems which they had to face on their return to Palestine: their attitude towards the Arabian world in the East to which they immigrated, and towards the Europaen world in the West from which they had emigrated.

To the first they do not yet belong; to the second they do not belong any more. Thus they stand between two worlds during the first phse of the rebuilding of Palestine.

The re-immigration of the Jews to Palestine should not mean colonisation in the sense of the imperialist colonial enterprises of the 19th Century. That is a common misconception,

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due to overlooking the age-old Semitic culture which is based on historically and geographically fixed conditions.

At the zenith of the Arab Empire of the 7th and 8th Centuries, the Semites - both Arabs and Jews - were the torchbearers of world enlightenment. That was at a time, when Europe went through the darkest period of her history. And even at its own lowest level, Arab civilization - both religion and language - was uniform and unbroken.

The national renaissance of opressed peoples - following the last war - has also roused the Arab world from its lethargie and will unite them into a compact block of great magnitude.

It has been said, that the re-entrance of the Jews into the Arab world does not mean anything else but civilization fighting the desert. That opinion origantes from the political mentality of the rational Western world, which political development since the last war has made obsolete. The unstable urban civilization based upon the onesided overvaluation of the intellect fails to appreciate the organic

culture of the East rooted in the unity of Man and Nature.

But it is this culture which produced the Moral Law and the Visions of the Bible.

This fertile soil needs only to be dug with the mature technique of the Western hemisphere in order to secure the common future of the Semitic world, its political and economical well-being.

The attitude of the Jew towards the Western world brings him face to face with the problems of to-day.

In historic times the creative occupation of the Jew was directed to the deeper but one-sided penetration into his religious principles, of which the Book of Books was the unique and monumental expression.

Because they were submerged by the great empires with their own political ambitions and their own artistic styles, the Jew found but a small field for his political and cultural activity.

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Within the narrow Ghetto, the representation of Jewish life was restricted to religious interpretation and philosophical speculation.

But when the arab Empire provided them with spiritual if not national freedom, they attained great political influence and created important pieces of art in the synagogues of Toledo and Padua.

The world of today faces the destruction of its political and cultural landmarks, destroyed by a materialist conception of life.

It entered the war in order to put an end to the consequences of that conception, which are the moral decay and the barbarism of our own days.

The new world has either to renounce the Dualism in which she is involved, and to be rebuilt on a reunion of matter and spirit or she will not come into being at all.

But the world has become too large and too well-known for a new Dark Age. Great continents are now selfsupporting and separated by oceans and will not surrender themselves to the same destiny.

There is too much knowledge, too much enlightenment in the world to be mastered by the threatening darkness.

But a written moral philosophy will not suffice today. Its

ethic has to be made visible. it must express the united will of the new community of men; a community which regards the results of individual scientific research and invention as common property and applies them to the benefit of all, a community that admits no social preference and political isolation.

At the same time the community will be built upon the law of nature on which families, clans, nations and races establish themselves and stand together.

Some of these great entities are already apparent: The American Continent and the British Commonwealth i.e. the English speaking world on both sides of the Atlantic- the Realm of the yellow race between the Indian Ocean

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and the Pacific, and the Semitic world as a signal of national renaissance of the Mediterranean.

Thus the process of the world's remodelling on the basis of great entities has already started, a beginning that the world has not yet known.

The infallible sign of an original beginning is the birth of an original architectural style.

All three great entities mentioned above have automatically accepted it, but the Mediterranean has emerged as the proper testing ground for the New Architecture: Spain - France and Italy and their African possessions - Greece, Turkey and all the countries of the Near East, including Palestine.

The return of the Jews to Palestine brings new life into that country dormant since centuries.

The heroic phase of the renaissance at the end of the 19th Century is carried into effect by groups returning from Eastern Europe. Intelligent and idealistic people, who visualize the restoration of their own Semitic culture as genuine solution of the Jewish problem.

They return to Palestine neither as conquerors nor as refugees. That is why they realize that the rebuilding of the country cannot be done except in communion with the original Arab population, and that only that part of the soil will in fact belong to them which they can till with their hands.

They are the people who break the ground and drain the swamps and who create the forms of communal life on which the social status of the Jewish Renaissance as a whole is based,

their communal life - similar to the communal economy of the Puritans of New England, the founders of the United States of America.

That is why the rural buildings of Jewish Palestine are extremely modest, whereas the buildings of their first rural town, Tel Aviv try to accommodate themselves to the special conditions of the orient - as do the more elaborate buildings of the Mandatory Government.

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An adaption of the kind by which the European Architectural Schools before 1914 made fit the styles following the Italian Renaissance for modern functions and requirements by taking off the stylistic accessories and not by using new structural and spatial conceptions for the sake of creating a new architectural style.

The beginning of the 20th Century, with the crescendo of its political and economic nationalism which led to the Great War, with the mounting pressure of antisemitism which the social consequences of the Great War caused to explode, presents to the Jews "a national home in Palestine", a gift that only today is seen to be two-edged. Two-edged because it induced the Jewish people to think of a State of their own, of the lesser goal given by the grace of Versailles, and deviated it from the major goal, to become an equal member of the Semitic commonwealth of nations.

But first of all the Balfour Declaration provides the Zionist Idea with a political basis and Palestine with a new influx of immigrants.

Many young idealists arrive but at the same time many of the middle-class and among them speculative elements. There arise new social forms of rural settlements and new suburbs both on an individualist basis.

Tel Aviv outgrows its original boundaries of a rural town. The market-place and the distribution centre of rural products develop into a provincial metropolis detached from its hinterland.

The beginning of land and building speculation imports the excreta of technics and at the same time the architectural experiments of post-war Europe.

Recurrent riots of a violent nature demonstrate that the Arab population is opposed.

Finally, the mass-expulsion of the Jews from Central Europe, which coincides with the restriction of immigration introduced by the rest of the continental countries of Europe

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and the countries overseas, leads to mass immigration into Palestine and to a boom.

Many young people of bourgeois stock and mostly well-bred turn to the land, the greater part to small capitalistic or suburban settlements. Many of the well-to-do arrive with free capital to invest, accompanied by renowned scientists and artists. The realization of the Zionist dream - the Jewish State - seems to be near.

Jerusalem extends to a large town, Tel Aviv to a capital, much too big for the Jewish hinterland to feed it.

Tel Aviv cuts itself off from its Arab Hinterland and develops into a 100% Jewish business centre with a port of its own, with its own language, its own costume. It becomes an enclave of European civilization within the Arab world that strives for unification.

The people from Central Europe with the unstable mentality of refugees forming the main part of the last wave of immigration, they have a false idea of the country's nationality-problem and of the general political development of the outside world.

They regard the racial theory of the Fascist countries merely as a new form of antisemitism instead of as a transitional stage of the development of peoples and races into great national entities.

Thus the contact between Jews and Arabs breaks and the great Arab revolt in 1936 is the inevitable consequence.

The revolt is fed by the same source that keeps the whole world in social and political unrest and led it into the chaotic situation of today.

The Arab youth believe their economic future to be threatened; the Arab Palestine her national future.

They consider an autonomous Jewish State sitting at the European window of the great Arab Hinterland and unconnected with its economic and political basis, as a deadly menace to their own connexion with the Western World.

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This menace and the separation of the world into two camps of different political ideologies makes the Arabs disposed to accept the help of those who are prepared to attack the existence of the rest of the world.

The Arab war on two fronts is the harvest of such seed - ideologically against the Jews and politically against English rule.

The White Book of the spring of 1939 is insufficient to stop it.

Only the outbreak of the War brought the revolt to a sudden end. Both Arabs and Jews unite in support of the powers of organic evolution against the powers of destructive revolution. The war may also mean the end of the policy which the Mandatory Government has applied to Palestine hitherto. For the shock caused by three years of bloodshed seems to have had a healing influence on the two communities: on the insufficiently established Jews and on the Arabs who are still insufficiently developed economically. Moreover the suddenness by which the revolt broke down, shows that all parts of the Arab population are aware that the help formerly given to them from abroad was due only to selfish imperialistic motives which at the end would have destroyed them too.

On the other hand, the Jews seem to grasp the fact that Palestine can only be built up in close collaboration with the Arabs and that she can become a place of well-being only in case both peoples come to an understanding.

As always consolidation starts during the time of convulsion. For the present collaboration which dire necessity has forced upon all parts of the Jewish population, signifies the beginning of a compromise between the extreme views of the immigrant from Eastern Europe, whose vision roused the country from sleep and the sense for reality of the immigrant from Central Europe.

The settlement is between the Eastern qualities promoting culture, based upon the phantasy of the mind preserved

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in the Ghetto, and the Western qualities promoting civilization, based upon scientific research and technique acquired by civil and spiritual liberty, the fruit of emancipation.

The settlement is between Individualism and Collectivism

which lead either to revolution and destruction or to sterile classification when based exclusively upon intellect, and which lead to spiritual evolution and to creation of symbols when intellect and vision combine.

It depends on the success of this settlement whether the Jewish community in Palestine will remain a colony or whether it will become a nation: either an essential part of the country, politically and spiritually of equal right, or but a minority politically and spiritually restrained.

The architectural development of the country during the last few years is a hopeful sign.

Government and Municipalities are working with energy and ability for a well-ordered planning of their towns and hinterlands against a speculation inimical to an orderly development.

The country's public institutions entrust with their buildings that kind of men who by education, efficiency and responsibility for the importance of the country seem to be qualified.

Such matured and artistically significant buildings have had a stabilizing influence on the urban and suburban private building activity.

Tel Aviv's new residential quarters prove that the best constructive and architectural results of the modern movement have already brought about an artistic expression of their own, corresponding to the climatic conditions of the Mediterranean.

The authorities responsible for rural settlements follow the same principle they have even initiated it.

The state of transition in which the whole architectural world finds itself - a stylistic conglomerate of yesterday and today - has to be replaced by an artistic certainty, which is based upon a uniform sense of beauty.

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Once Palestine was the bridge between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean and the pathway for expeditions of alien but artistically mature nations.

Today, after 2000 years, Palestine the gate to the Semitic world is an important point on the air-route between Europe and the Far East.

Formerly the image of an uncreative provincial art Pales-

tine of today is symbolizing the union between the most modern civilization and the most antique culture. It is the place where intellect and vision - matter and spirit meet. In arrangement commanded by this union both Arabs and Jews, both members of the Semitic family, should be equally interested. On its solution depends the fate of Palestine to become a part of the New-World which is going to replace the world that has gone. Genesis repeats itself.

Jerusalem, February 1940.

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