Introduction

*They Say There Is a Land* . . .

Victors and Vanquished

The great Hebrew poet and translator Shaul Tchernichovsky sat aboard an electric tram as it rattled through Berlin's busy streets in 1923. Overhead the wires sent a hum through the crowded car. He stared out the window at the cityscape and smoothed his walrus moustache with his fingers. A child of the countryside, Tchernichovsky first gained renown as a Romantic poet of the natural world. While industrialized Weimar Berlin flickered past him, he was shot through with a longing for another place, for another landscape. Inspiration creased the author's brow and he cast a wild-eyed glance from right to left looking for a scrap of paper. None could be found. His gaze then fell upon the white cuffs of his shirt. He gripped his fountain pen and began to scrawl the words to a new poem on the starched fabric. That smeared verse born in a moment's passion was destined to become one of Tchernichovsky's most famous poems, and also one of his most vexing.

Handsome, barrel-chested, and with a wavy mane of hair, Tchernichovsky was nearly fifty in 1923. He had endured the early twentieth century's upheavals, serving as a medic in World War I and witnessing the Bolshevik Revolution. Tchernichovsky was also a committed Zionist who wrote in praise of Jewish national rebirth. For years he had wandered from place to place, from his native Ukraine across Russia, to Switzerland, to Turkey, and onward to Germany even as
he set his heart on living in *Eretz Israel*—the land of Israel. Yet the modern era seemed to offer only dispossession and dislocation. In interwar Germany, Tchernichovsky attempted to eke out a living as a physician while he wrote, but few patients trusted a wordsmith with their health. His poverty grew so extreme that he was forced to walk the freezing winter streets without a coat. At one point he considered emigrating to Madagascar, where the French colonial government offered posts to doctors willing to combat the island’s rampant tropical diseases. *Eretz Israel* always beckoned, but Tchernichovsky was frustrated by his efforts to secure a position in the one home he desired. And so he literally wore his heart’s desire on his sleeve in the form of the verse to which he gave birth aboard a tram more than eighty years ago.

The resulting eight-stanza poem, “They Say: There Is a Land,” reveals the depths of his distress. The final three stanzas read:

_Arrady_
_We have crossed_
_Many deserts and seas,_
_Long we have walked,_
_Our strength is at an end._

_How_
_have we gone astray?_
_When will we be unmolested?_
_That land of sun,_
_That land never found._

_Perhaps—_
_the Land no longer exists?_
_Surely—its radiance has grown dull!_
_To us_
_God bequeaths nothing—^4_

The speaker’s sense of exclusion from the promised land—the “land of sun”—and of having been forsaken by a God who “bequeaths nothing” reveals a lack of faith in the Jewish future in *Eretz Israel*. 
Tchernichovsky recognized that the anguish expressed by his poem would not exactly become a rallying cry for the Zionist pioneers then settling the soil. So he revised the poem that same year, cutting the stanzas above as well as two others. In their place he added eight spirited lines that would serve as a stirring conclusion. The revised, shortened anthem exhorts readers to redeem themselves by redeeming their ancestral land.

The two contrasting versions of “They Say: There Is a Land” continue to rattle through the author’s collected works like prisoners joined at their ankles by a chain. Tchernichovsky later indicated that he himself could not decide which he preferred, the pessimistic original or the optimistic revision.\(^5\) His own equivocation is far from surprising. He was well known for his exuberant despair and his desperate exuberance. As Tchernichovsky once declared, he was the poet both of the victors and of the vanquished.\(^6\)

Despite the foregoing discussion, this is not a book devoted to literary criticism. This book traces the history of an idea—the tenaciously held idea of creating a territorial solution for Jewish homelessness beyond the biblical land of Israel. The opposing sentiments expressed by Tchernichovsky’s two versions of “They Say: There Is a Land” are representative of a struggle that existed at the dawn of modern Jewish nationalism and dogged its development for decades. And because this book presents vivid accounts of individuals who worked to establish a variety of Jewish promised lands, the story of the origin of Tchernichovsky’s poem frames the human scale of the dramas that unfold in the chapters to come.

Readers will meet with the fascinating but now obscure figures whose efforts to establish Jewish homelands involved utopian fervor, diplomacy, geographic exploration, catastrophe and perseverance, as well as love and tragic death. Familiar personages such as John Quincy Adams, David Lloyd George, Theodore Roosevelt, Albert Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Joseph P. Kennedy all played bit parts in these schemes. But I have opted to tell the story of the global search for a Jewish home from the perspective of those typically relegated to footnotes. The effect is to sing what Tchernichovsky called the “song of the vanquished,”\(^7\) and to bear witness in a minor key to their dreams. One of the uses of history, it has been said, is to rescue lost causes from
oblivion. To the extent that this book details six proposals for alternate Zions stretching across four continents, it restores these lost causes to the annals of modern Jewish history.

This book further aims to reterritorialize space and place in prevailing conceptions of Jewish nationalism. The narrative this book recounts thus presents a shadow history of Zionism—a history that exposes what has been obscured in the glare cast by both popular and academic histories of Israel's establishment. Many writers tend toward a teleological view of the rise of Israel in the twentieth century, often locating evidence of the nation's inevitable design from among the contingent processes of political evolution. Such narratives assert the supposedly universal significance of a specific brand of Jewish nationalism—Zionism—at the expense of competing nationalist ideologies that once battled “red in tooth and claw.”

The echo here of Darwinian discourse is intentional. We may think of Jewish nationalism as a tree with several evolutionary branches, only one of which survived to thrive. One of these vanquished branches possessed a prophetic appeal in certain eras, but may ultimately be seen as a humanitarian program committed to securing a Jewish home in any available territory. For the sake of economy, we may term this truncated limb “territorialism”; its mood is that of Tchernichovsky’s original version of “They Say: There Is a Land.” The victorious branch of nationalism that has flowered and grown may be characterized as idealistic and given to a messianic vision of sacrifice to ensure a Jewish home in one unique location: the biblical land of Israel. This is Zionism as we understand the term today; its tone is that of the revised “They Say: There Is a Land.”

Zionism and territorialism, despite considerable differences, share several fundamental ideological principles. Both movements were dedicated to establishing a territorial entity under Jewish control through political means and the process of mass settlement, to a revival of Jewish social and cultural existence through demographic concentration and physical labor, and to a renaissance of national identity through the perpetuation of Jewish language and creative endeavor. They differed, above all, in where that territorial entity should be founded, what forms Jewish socio-cultural life should take, and what language best
expressed Jewish national identity. These two rival movements also disagreed on the urgency of finding a solution to Jewish persecution and statelessness. The leaders of mainstream Zionism devoted themselves to an incremental vision of Jewish national rebirth. Territorialists, on the other hand, maintained that a radical and immediate solution to Jewish distress was necessary. Given the fate of European Jewry during the Holocaust, it is difficult to reflect on territorialism without being haunted by the missed opportunities to save hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of lives.

Zionism and territorialism made use of similar operative strategies to justify or recommend practical actions based upon their ideological principles. Both movements created formal membership organizations, held international congresses, launched periodicals to disseminate their views, attracted notable intellectuals to their cause, established or sought the creation of financial institutions for colonization, dispatched scientific commissions, negotiated with world leaders, and lobbied to secure agreements for Jewish immigration. In short, Zionist and territorialist leaders both said there was a land; they just couldn't agree on where it was located or how it was to be constituted.

Yiddish Policemen, Ostrich Farmers, Turtle-Hunters

Author Michael Chabon’s best-selling novel The Yiddish Policemen’s Union (2007) introduced readers around the world to an altered Jewish state in his depiction of a Yiddish-speaking refugee enclave in America. But the facts surrounding those who sought Jewish homes elsewhere are even more remarkable than Chabon’s fiction. These visionaries imagined an island sanctuary for Jews and Native Americans on the edge of Niagara Falls, ostrich farms dotting East Africa, railways connecting Angola to Europe, modern agriculture flourishing on Madagascar’s inland plateaus, skyscrapers towering above Tasmania’s windswept bush, and turtle-hunting Holocaust survivors in Suriname. I have journeyed to each of these proposed homelands, treading phantom landscapes to explore what historian Simon Schama called the “archive of the feet.” But the interconnected stories of these projects
have been recovered using traditional archival materials as well: letters, telegrams, internal reports, diaries, FBI dispatches, newspapers, and hundreds of other documents scoured from repositories the world over.

Dozens of other ideas and projects for Jewish settlement were launched during the time period this book discusses. The most familiar of these was the Soviet Union’s announcement of the Jewish Autonomous Region in far eastern Siberia (Birobidzhan), though for the most part the organized territorialist movement treated the scheme coolly. While I mention this episode and others in passing, I focus most closely on six examples of what may be termed territorial autonomist projects for promised lands: in upstate New York, East Africa, Angola’s Benguela Plateau, the central highlands of Madagascar, extreme southwestern Tasmania, and Suriname’s torrid rainforest. These proposals form the core of this book’s exploration because they adhere to the following criteria: (1) they were initiated and supported by a Jewish individual or organization; (2) they aspired to sovereignty, or at the very least, to a high degree of cultural and political autonomy; (3) they received the imprimatur of a diplomatic promise or of legislative consent; and (4) the disparate territories were each the subject of a survey commission, a fact which reveals how a scientific application of settlement ideas aimed to alter Jewish reality and geopolitics. Furthermore, (5) each plan was advanced by a significant author. The connection between the literary imagination and the geographic imagination testifies to the crucial role that writers played in transforming a dispersed Jewry into a nation with territorial ambitions.

Zionist historiography and literary scholarship have long demonstrated the intimate bond between what it is now alliterated as “nation and narration.”14 But insofar as there exist academic studies of territorialism and its leading figures,15 there has been little attention paid to the exceptional role that authors and journalists played in the many thwarted efforts at Jewish nation-building. As scholar of nationalism Anthony Smith has recognized, intellectuals define national identity and express a community’s social and political aspirations through arts and letters.16 But literary and artistic works have in greater measure failed to create a coherent sense of national identity, or even to chart
the course of a given ethnic community’s ambitions. A nation may indeed be an “imagined community,” but the contours of some nations remain forever imaginary. Territorialism’s author-activists invoked pragmatic doctrines, realpolitik, the natural and social sciences, and technocratic principles in support of their state-building projects. Their Zionist antagonists—including Menachem Ussishkin (an engineer), Chaim Weizmann (a chemist), and Stephen Wise (a rabbi and power broker)—often seemed to ground political action for a Jewish state in Palestine in an art of the impossible. What these men lacked in terms of the literary, they more than made up for in their mythopoesis of the biblical land of Israel. Ironically, the literati who championed territorialism may be seen as having suffered from a deficit of imagination and their Zionist adversaries from its surfeit.

Territorialism, like Zionism, shared a broad mission of cultural and psychological Jewish renewal and a conviction that the Emancipation had failed the masses. Along with various strains of Zionist thinking, territorialism also advocated a land-based solution to the historical problem of Jewish homelessness. Yet unlike mainstream Zionism, territorialism sought a homeland outside of the biblical land of Israel. All mainstream forms of Zionism developed to promote Hebrew, encouraged a break with diasporic ways of life, and fostered a sense of continuity with the Jewish history and memory of Eretz Israel. Territorialism, at least in its later incarnations, promoted Yiddish and nurtured a sense of continuity with European Jewish folkways, even as its adherents sought to hasten the end of the Diaspora itself. Zionism’s leadership was primarily concerned with the fate of the yishuv—the Jewish community of pre-state Israel. Territorialist leaders were obsessed by the existential dangers faced by millions of vulnerable Jews in Europe and Russia. They cast off the mythologies of ancient Israel in favor of creating a new Jewish land somewhere—anywhere—else.

The intellectual history of territorialism reveals the first crisis of Zionism. Today Zionism remains the chief Jewish nationalist ideology, often to the point of rendering past and present alternative visions of nationhood invisible. Yet there are clear indications that at least one territorialist movement garnered more popular support on the yidishe gas—“the Jewish street”—in the first decades of the twentieth century than Zionism. With the rise of Nazism in the early 1930s and with
Jewish immigration increasingly restricted by the world’s nations, territorialism again proved an attractive option for many. Later, as Hitler’s grip on Europe tightened, territorialism found influential supporters and presented a resurgent threat to Zionism. If only for the reason that territorialism was considered a viable form of Jewish nationalism by its proponents and sympathizers, and as a danger to Zionist dreams by that rival movement’s leadership, a survey of territorialism’s most notable leaders and their projects is an important addition to existing historiography.

A number of other modern Jewish political theories developed contemporaneously to territorialism and allow us to clarify the principles of this now mostly forgotten ideology. A useful though far from complete list of competing movements includes: (I) various Zionist incarnations, such as mainstream or Labor Zionism (with its mutually antagonistic parties), religious Zionism (Mizrahi), Revisionism (the New Zionist Organization), the binationalist Ihud (Union), and the cultural or spiritual Zionism associated with Ahad Ha’am (Asher Ginsberg) and his followers; (II) Diaspora nationalism, incorporating Bundism and other non-Zionist or anti-Zionist socialist streams that sought autonomy in the Diaspora, and (III) “Agudism,” a religio-political movement aligned with a metaphysical conception of Jewish nationhood. We may consider territorialism along with these three associated ideologies as chambers in the divided heart of Jewish nationalism, connected though compartmentalized, and together pulsing with life in the modern era. The borders between these positions were, however, permeable, and individual proponents of these schools of thought were capable of remarkable fluidity. Though necessarily reductive, the following schema allows nonspecialists a glimpse of the intellectual agitation of the recent past.

(I) Zionism vs. territorialism: Broadly speaking, Labor Zionism championed a socialist oriented, agro-industrial commitment to Jewish national revival in what was first Ottoman Palestine, and later, British Mandate Palestine. Territorialists supported either a bourgeois settler colonialism, or agro-industrial social revolutionary settlements on modest to large areas of land somewhere other than Palestine. Militant nationalist Vladimir (Ze’ev) Jabotinsky and his Revisionists adopted a maximalist position regarding territory in the land of Israel.
Territorialists did not believe a viable Jewish state could arise in the land of Israel no matter what boundaries were established. Adherents of the Mizrahi platform attempted to reconcile a secular movement often hostile to Jewish tradition—Zionism writ large—to religious values. Territorialism did not typically express hostility toward Jewish traditions or observance. The Ihud and its related forerunner Brit Shalom were keenly aware of the Arab population in Palestine and sought to work with them toward binationalist compromise. The territorialists, for all their utopianism, believed that Jewish settlement would create an endless state of war with an Arab population who would never accept mass Jewish immigration. Territorialism was thus opposed to binationalism; the movement’s aims were fundamentally separatist. Ahad Ha’am’s cultural Zionism demanded a spiritual center in the biblical land of Israel that would revitalize the Diaspora. Territorialists, however, believed that a mass Jewish settlement in some other corner of the globe would rejuvenate Jewish life throughout the world, including in Eretz Israel.

(II) Diaspora nationalism vs. territorialism: Like Diaspora nationalists—those inspired by historian Simon Dubnov, Bundists, folkists, and others—territorialism sought cultural and some measure of political autonomy for the Jewish people. But unlike Diaspora nationalists, territorialists believed that such autonomy could only be achieved on land acquired through diplomatic means and colonized as the result of mass immigration and rational, planned settlement. Diaspora nationalists called for Jews to reinvigorate themselves in their scattered communities throughout Europe and Russia where they already lived. Territorialists called for an in-gathering of Jews on foreign soil that they would settle and then make their own. Though both Diaspora nationalists and territorialists expressed what might generically be termed democratic-socialist visions, the two ideologies were divided as to the role of territorial acquisition and possession. Dubnovian autonomists and Bundists, for example, were committed to the idea of nationhood without statehood. Territorialists dedicated themselves to the idea of a land-based nationalism achieved through cultural and civil autonomy, or even sovereign independence. In today’s world we might consider what was once called “third person Zionism”—activism, advocacy, and fundraising on behalf of Israel by Jews who have no intention of leaving.
their distant homes—as a kind of contemporary Diaspora nationalism in the service of Zionist goals.

(III) “Agudism” vs. territorialism: Many Zionist thinkers and pioneers were not only secular, but antireligious. Agudism arose as a reactionary political movement of orthodox Jews who fought modernization and opposed Zionism on theological grounds. While many of the territorialists were secular, they evinced more sympathy for religious tradition than did most mainstream Zionists. Territorialism and Agudism shared an essential belief that the land of Israel was less important than the people of Israel. Agudism promoted Jewish rebirth through a strict adherence to religious practice in places where Jews already lived in significant numbers, though some Agudists did advocate for a Torah-true pioneer movement in pre-state Palestine. Territorialism, as has been stated, wanted to move a large portion of the Jewish body politic elsewhere. Whereas territorialism was originally imperial and bourgeois, and later social revolutionary, Agudism refined an allegiance to rabbinic authority into a political ideology. Similarly, territorialism was materialist where Agudism was metaphysical. Orthodox anti-Zionist political movements have not often been considered part of the history of Jewish nationalism, yet they are a phenomenon of the modern era that can profitably be viewed in this context.

For many Jewish nationalists, the virtues of a mass exodus to Palestine were therefore not self-evident during the first-half century congruent with the rise of Zionism. Today we may take for granted the inevitability of the Jewish state’s existence in much of Eretz Israel. This common assumption, however, is an “existential illusion,” a conviction that may stem from a transposition of Jewish messianic beliefs to the arena of worldly politics. As welcome as the Jewish assumption of power in the State of Israel may be, we should remember that committed nationalist factions sought their promised lands in many other locations and on the bases of divergent political theories. The contentious past of Jewish nationalist life does not diminish Zionist achievements. On the contrary, it burnishes them by demonstrating Zionism’s success over and against the appeal of influential opponents.

To be clear, this book is not a Zionist polemic. I am not a propagandist, though I am attached to Israel through bonds of culture, friendship, family, and citizenship. Neither is this book a territorialist
polemic—a ludicrous and anachronistic proposition if ever there was one. True, my sympathies lie with territorialism’s proponents who are the heroes of this book; identification with one’s subject is a familiar hazard for authors. Zionism’s heroes, moreover, already have their books. Nor is this an entry into the crowded field of works by historians, journalists, and literary scholars who “bash” Israel for its shortcomings, real and imagined. The narratives that follow do, however, reveal how some influential Zionists worked to undermine territorialist projects. My purpose in highlighting these episodes is to demonstrate how the Zionist establishment viewed territorialism as a serious competitor for Jewish and non-Jewish support. This fact restores to territorialism some of the significance it once possessed.

Zionism emerged the victor, of course, and responsibility for the defeat of territorialism cannot be attributed solely to the obstructionist campaigns waged by Zionist activists. Territorialist leaders were indeed visionaries, but they were often blinded by a belief in the essential benevolence of the community of Western nation states they were eager to join as equals. So too were they seduced by the internal logic and pragmatism they were certain their expansive schemes possessed. Because they were charismatic, resourceful, and productive people themselves, territorialism’s leading figures failed to fully understand that power was vested in the bureaucracies, institutions, and the entrenched interests of the governments with whom they treated, and not the isolated good will of those governments’ representatives. The following chapters reveal that the remote areas suggested as Jewish homelands also did not possess a living memory of a collective past—a persuasive ethnoscape—that could attract either the persecuted masses seeking an exit from Europe, or the funding required to resettle them.

Chapter One describes the pioneering work of American playwright and editor Mordecai Manuel Noah, who attempted to establish a Jewish city-state in upstate New York during the first decades of the nineteenth century. Noah is often acknowledged as the first Jew in the modern era to plot the creation of a Jewish state. He originally hoped to establish a sanctuary within the United States, but later argued for the restoration of Jewry to the holy land. Noah may therefore be considered both a territorialist and a proto-Zionist, but in either guise his importance lies in...
the fact that he recognized that Jewish power is vested in a particular place. A detailed discussion of Noah's plans for homelands in America and Ottoman Palestine allows us to distinguish between these states of the imagination, and to point to an inherent tension in what later came to be known as Zionism. Noah's efforts fascinated Anglo-Jewish author Israel Zangwill, one of Herzl's most intimate collaborators, and Noah's example may have spurred Zangwill to ally himself with Herzl's fledgling Zionist movement.

Chapter Two reveals the extent to which Zangwill and others, especially Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the man credited with reviving Hebrew as a spoken language, championed settlement in Great Britain's East African Protectorate (now Kenya). The dilemma occasioned by Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain's offer of land to Herzl in East Africa—the “Uganda Plan” of 1903—led to a power struggle in the Zionist Organization. The dispatch of a Zionist Commission to evaluate a large swath of territory in western Kenya nearly ruptured the movement. My research indicates that the findings of this expedition were likely sabotaged from the inside by a member of the Commission. The subsequent rejection of the British land grant in East Africa launched Zangwill's breakaway territorialist movement.

Chapter Three details how Zangwill's Jewish Territorial Organization (ITO) negotiated with the Portuguese government to create a republic in Angola in the second decade of the twentieth century. One of the greatest scientific minds of Zangwill's generation, Dr. John Walter Gregory, traveled through Angola in search of suitable territory for the ITO. The positive report of his expedition, coupled with Portuguese self-interest, almost led to the establishment of a Jewish state there. World War I helped scuttle ITOist colonization efforts in that West African possession, but in the years preceding World War II the refugee crisis in Europe resuscitated interest in Zangwill's territorialist program.

Chapter Four examines how the Freeland League for Jewish Territorial Colonization, the successor to the ITO, and its early ideologue, German author Alfred Döblin, worked to fashion a Jewish colony in French overseas possessions, most notably on the island of Madagascar. This chapter also describes the suspected involvement of right-wing Jewish nationalist Ze'ev Jabotinsky in that territorialist evacuation scheme.
A three-man commission sailed to Madagascar in 1937 to investigate the island’s suitability for Jewish colonization. While the findings of the two Jewish members of the expedition were disappointing, for a time the plan held out hope for Jews as conditions worsened across much of Europe.

Chapter Five portrays the work of Melech Ravitch (Zekharye-Khone Bergner), an important Yiddish poet and editor, who helped revive territorialist designs on portions of Australia. The Freeland League’s guiding spirit, former Soviet commissar of justice Isaac Nachman Steinberg, struggled to forge a Jewish micronation down under. Steinberg, an editor and author, first looked to the continent’s arid northwest as Melech Ravitch had suggested. Later, as war erupted, Steinberg turned his attention to Tasmania. His collaborators, Jewish journalist Caroline Isaacson and Christian gentleman Critchley Parker Junior, pursued the Tasmania option and received the support of influential governmental figures. The story of their relationship and of Parker’s doomed survey of southwestern Tasmania reminds readers that the fate of politics often rests on the vagaries of fortune.

Chapter Six chronicles Steinberg’s attempt to father a South American freehold for Holocaust survivors in the jungles of Dutch Guiana, now independent Suriname. Steinberg drew inspiration for the Freeland League plan from a semiautonomous eighteenth-century Jewish settlement that once flourished in that country. The favorable reports of two expert commissions sent to Dutch Guiana to prepare for Jewish colonization demonstrate how scientific and rational calculations laid the foundation for this important but little-known plan. An epilogue summarizes the legacy of territorialism and speculates on the continued attraction the movement holds for artists and thinkers.

Before I set off to visit the site of the planned Jewish city-state in Tasmania, Australian novelist and historian Richard Flanagan told me that “the abyss between failure and success is where greatness lies.” Territorialism’s leaders may not have achieved greatness by this measure, but neither does the fact that they failed indict their efforts. Rather, it is the scope of their aspirations that determines territorialism’s value. I hope that the epic sweep of their struggles will inspire readers of this book to reject the shabbiness of reality and to think of better futures wherever they live.
Site of Two Plots of Land Purchased by Noah for Ararat. An 1829 Map Indicates the Site of Ararat North of Noah’s Purchase as Seen Here