

## THE LAND ISSUE

### CASE LEARNING ACTIVITY

*THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF LAND PURCHASE, DECEMBER 31, 1937*

#### LESSON OVERVIEW

To make the Jewish state a reality, Zionists needed to both attract Jewish immigrants and connect them with the land in Eretz Yisrael. If possible, unimpeded and unlimited growth towards both objectives was essential. Neither goal, however, could be achieved without the other. Half of that necessity required establishing a viable Jewish national territory. Many Arabs living in the area that became Palestine were vigorously opposed to any Jewish presence there. Some who were moderate toward the Zionists before and after World War I became increasingly hardened in their outlook of Zionism. Some despite their opposition to Zionism publically, helped their own economic well-being by selling lands to immigrating Zionists, most of whom were private buyers until the late 1930s. In addition, Ottoman and British regulations impeded easy access to the land. Land was not given to the Zionists by the Ottoman sultan, and the British did not make any gifts in the form of land to the Zionists. On the contrary, the British allocated large tracts of land to Arab peasants in the 1920s in the area around [Beisan \(today Beit She'an\)](#) in the northern part of Palestine.

What the Zionists needed in terms of land, they had to acquire and pay for themselves. To do so, they had to buy land from Arabs who owned land. These were large and small landowners who resided either within the geographic boundaries of Palestine, or resided outside of the boundaries as they were defined by the League of Nations.

For a short background to the history of the Jewish land purchase process in Eretz Yisrael, please see: Kenneth W. Stein, "The Jewish National Fund: land purchase methods and priorities, 1924–1939," in *Middle Eastern Studies* (April 1984), vol. 20, no. 2 pp. 190-205.

#### ENDURING UNDERSTANDING

To make the Jewish State a reality, Zionists needed to both attract Jewish immigrants & connect them with the land in Eretz Yisrael.

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What was the Zionist purpose for acquiring land??
- Why were Arabs in Palestine frustrated with their political and economic lot?
- What caused Arab owners to want to sell their land?
- What was meant by "the projected Arab and Jewish State"?
- Why would Zionists be eager to buy land on the borders of both projected states?

#### OBJECTIVES: Students will:

- Analyze a confidential document
- Role-play reaction to the events of a historical time period
- Research how the Zionists made the plan outlined in the document a reality

#### TIME RECOMMENDED:

Four 45 Minute Sessions

#### GRADE LEVEL:

Grades 6-8, 9-12, Adult Education

#### ASSESSMENT:

Students will participate in role playing exercise centered on outcomes of the letter.

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#### ACTIVITIES AND PROCEDURES:

##### Activity One: Analyzing the Document

1. Eliahu Epstein, who would later become Israel's first ambassador to the [United States took notes at a December 1937](#) meeting of the JNF. It was convened to shape land-purchase strategy in the midst of Arab-Jewish violence, immediately after the British proposed the 1937 partition of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states, which was negated as a political option a year later.

The first three paragraphs of this document essentially tell its whole story. Reading the entire document is suggested. Using either the introduction to the document or the article referenced above, discuss the historical moment in which this December 1937 meeting took place.

In context this meeting took place approximately ten years prior to the United Nations voting to partition Palestine into an Arab and Jewish state, with an economic union between the two proposed states. In a more immediate context, the meeting that is referenced by the Epstein Letter took place five months after the British suggested partitioning Palestine into two states as provided by their [July 1937 Peel/Royal Commission Report](#). There are other chronological benchmarks which can be identified by going to the [timeline](#) for this period.

2. After you have set the scene, divide students into small groups and distribute the text of [the document](#). Using the [guidelines for analyzing a primary source document](#), have students answer the five major questions in their groups. In addition, either as a discussion after the analysis or as part of it, you may want to include any or all of the following:

##### Questions to clarify in understanding the "Epstein Letter"

- a. Identify the Zionist purpose for acquiring land. What had transpired in the acquisition of land since the 1880s?
- b. What disturbances are being referenced? Why were Arabs in Palestine frustrated with their political and economic lot?
- c. Why would the disturbances cause Arab owners to want to sell their land?
- d. What was meant by "the projected Arab and Jewish state"?
- e. Why would Zionists be eager to buy land on the borders of both projected states?
- f. Why did Arab vendors want to complete their sales in a short time? Were they fearful of something happening that would prevent their ability to sell land freely?
- g. Identify the areas where the Zionists were considering purchasing land. What was the strategic value of each place either in terms of resources (water sources for the Jordan), value in relation to the British administration (Haifa-oil pipeline from Mosul), or the need to link important places in a proposed Jewish state (Tel Aviv-Jerusalem)?
- h. What was the Royal (Peel) Commission Report? Why did the Zionists appreciate a two state idea, but not the size of the states proposed?

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**ACTIVITIES AND PROCEDURES:**

**Activity One: (Continued)**

**Digging Deeper:**

What did it mean to the Zionist leaders that Arab offers to sell lands outstripped Zionist capacity to purchase them? How would a Zionist leader interpret the reality of Arabs rioting against the Jewish national home, while receiving notice that prominent Arabs were at the same time willing to sell portions of their land to the Zionists? Would the Zionists have viewed this as a glaring inconsistency between private and public actions?

**Activity Two: Identifying the Players**

What names can be identified as key participants in the Jewish Agency and Jewish land acquisition apparatus?

Have students research about the roles at that time of:

- Eliahu Epstein
- David Ben-Gurion
- Moshe Sharret
- Chaim Weizmann
- Eliezer Kaplan
- Arthur Hankte
- Rabbi Meyer Berlin
- Abraham Granovsky
- Yehoshua Hankin
- Yaakov Thon
- Menachem Ussischkin
- Yosef Weitz

**Questions to consider and guide research:**

- a. How did the points of view of these men differ with one another over land purchase policy? Or Evolve over time?
- b. Were their differences overcome because of the greater objective of securing key portions of Palestine for the future Jewish state?
- c. What other positions of leadership did they ultimately take as the state developed and became a reality?

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#### ACTIVITIES AND PROCEDURES

##### **Activity Three: Assessment #1 - Simulation Activity - Drawing the Map/Raising Funds**

*(Supplies Needed: Colored pencils, maps)*

Having them use the “Epstein Letter” and Peel report as a guide, divide students into working groups to strategize about land purchases and planning during the end of 1937.

1. Distribute the map of [Jewish land possessions in 1930](#) as well as a blank outline map of Israel.
2. Using the map of 1930 as a guide, have students :
  - a. Outline the areas that are indicated as being offered for sale by the “Epstein Letter”
  - b. In a different color, mark the areas that have been designated for a Jewish and Arab State in the Peel Report.
  - c. In the “Epstein Letter there is some disagreement as to where the focus of land purchases should be. In a third color students should indicate on their maps which areas they think should be the focused areas in which to concentrate the land buying effort. They will need to explain why they chose the areas they did.
  - d. As the letter indicates, more land is available than funds to purchase that land. Have the students identify and research about the Zionist organization, Keren Hayesod. What was its primary goal?

Have each group act as an agent for the Keren Hayesod looking for ways to fundraise for land purchases by developing a fundraising pitch/plan. What parts of this letter would you extract for use in fund-raising in North America, or Argentina, or Australia, or South Africa? ([You may also want to see CIE's lesson on Keren Hayesod posters from 1942](#))

##### **Activity Four: Assessment #2 - Role Play Activity**

Divide students into three groups for a role play based on the implications of the letter. Each group will need to write a newspaper editorial as a response to the “Epstein Letter”

**Group One:** Have the students assume the roles of members of the Arab Higher Committee, the group of self-anointed Palestinian Arab leaders who determined policy for the Arab community in Palestine. Who was in the AHC? Would some members of the AHC have used this letter as evidence that they were losing Palestine, or would they have been too embarrassed to make such information public? Would the publication of this document have endangered the lives of the proposed Arab owners who were willing to sell to the Zionists?

**Group Two:** Have the students assume the roles of the British administrators in Palestine who wanted to maintain reasonable civility between the communities and sometimes tilted heavily against the Zionists and profoundly in favor of the Arab community struggling against Zionist growth. If you were a British administration official, how would you manage your sympathies for the Arab cause while understanding that the very people you wanted to protect were engaged in private actions that undermined their long-term interests? What should a high ranking British official do with this letter, if he were to come across it? Should he send it to London and share it with his peers in the Colonial Office, or should he hide the political reality of the moment: Arabs were willingly selling land to Jewish buyers!

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##### **Activity Four: (Continued)**

**Group Three:** Have the students assume the role of an Arab organization in Palestine that seeks to prevent land from being sold to Jews. If you worked for the Arab Nation Fund, whose purpose was to rescue land from being sold to the Zionists, and you had this letter in your possession, what would you emphasize to an interested Arab who wanted to preserve land in Arab ownership (and keep it from Zionists)? Would you reveal the contents of the whole letter or only parts of it?