

The Land Issue: The Epstein Letter, December 31, 1937

[Click here for a more comprehensive curriculum developed for student learners based on these questions](#)

1. 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 in Eretz Yisrael. 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. As for the Jews streaming out of Europe, the appeal of going to Palestine was simply very small as compared to the magnetic pull to other parts of the world – such as North America, Australia, and South Africa – where liberty, freedom, and greater economic opportunity awaited them. For some Jews, though Zionism resonated as an important ideal, they did not wish to confront the harsh challenges of the early pioneering lifestyle in Palestine. Further limiting Jewish territorial growth in Palestine was the severe absence of money that was required to fulfill both key objectives: getting to Palestine and buying lands.

2. 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, discusses 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.

3. What follows are some questions that might be posed in reading and analyzing the minutes of this meeting which took place during the last days of 1937.
 - 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?
4. What names can be identified as key participants in the Jewish Agency and Jewish land acquisition apparatus? What were the roles at that time of Epstein, Ben-Gurion, Sharret, Weizmann, Kaplan, Hankte, Berlin, Granovsky, and Ussischkin? How did the points of view of these men differ with one another over land purchase policy? Were their differences overcome because of the greater objective of securing key portions of Palestine for the future Jewish state?
5. 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?
6. How did the Zionists choose which lands to purchase for nation-building purposes? They considered acquiring land that might be contiguous to previously purchased land; would they want to buy land on the proposed borders of the Jewish state so that they might swap lands in the future? What does it mean that the lands offered were “examined and considered to be satisfactory?” What were the criteria that the Zionist land purchasing agents took into account (price, number of previous owners so a contract would be easier to fulfill, water availability, land cultivability, neighbors, whether contiguous lands could be added, or whether this was the contiguous addition, length of contract, amount of money need for first installment to trigger the contract’s legal transfer, number of Arab tenants, farmers, or grazers in occupation of the land prior to a transfer that might require compensation from either the purchaser or the seller). The article on the JNF referred to above has answers to these questions.

7. How did the Zionists propose to raise the funds for these purchases?

Possible additional exercises:

1. 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? If so, if you were a Zionist leader, would you publicize the name of the Arab sellers, or would protect the well-being of the proposed seller? If the Zionists wanted to conduct future transactions, would it make sense to expose participating Arab land sellers?
2. 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!
3. Have the students identify the Zionist organization, Karen Hayesod. What was its primary goal? How would the students act as an agent for the Karen Hayesod looking for ways to fundraise for land purchases? What parts of this letter would you extract for use in fund-raising in North America, or Argentina, or Australia, or South Africa?
4. Assume that some students work for 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?
5. Assume you were writing a history of Zionism, ten years after the letter was published: what would you include about the letter's contents that you might not include if you wrote the history sixty years afterwards, or vice-versa? Why might a historian's interpretation of a document be affected the time period he/she is writing in? What role would the letter's contents play if you had to write the Palestinian narrative of Israeli history? If you had the letter in hand as a historian, would you include it when telling the Palestinian story, or would you feel it appropriate simply not to mention the letter (its

contents or implications)?

6. If you wish to read further about Arab complicity in supporting the development of the Jewish national home, see: Hillel Cohen, *Army of Shadows: Palestinian Collaboration with Zionism, 1917-1948*, University of California Press, 2008.