

# Why Israel has Silenced the 1948 Story of Nazareth's Survival. The Only Palestinian City that was not Ethnically Cleansed

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*A rarely told story of the 1948 war that founded Israel concerns Nazareth's survival. It is the only Palestinian city in what is today Israel that was not ethnically cleansed during the year-long fighting. Other cities, such as Jaffa, Lydd, Ramleh, Haifa and Acre, now have small Palestinian populations that mostly live in ghetto-like conditions in what have become Jewish cities. Still others, like Tiberias and Safad, have no Palestinians left in them at all.*

*Nazareth was not only an anomaly; it was a mistake. It was supposed to be cleared of its Palestinian population, just like those other Palestinian cities now in Israel. Much to Israel's regret, it has become an unofficial capital for Israel's 1.6 million Palestinian citizens, a fifth of the Israeli population.*

*The reason for Nazareth's survival are the actions of one individual. Ben Dunkelman, a Canadian Jew who was the commander of the Israeli army's Seventh Armoured Brigade, disobeyed orders to expel Nazareth's residents.*

*Dunkelman's role has been largely obscured in the historical record – and for good reason. Israel would prefer that observers make an unjustified assumption: that “Christian” Nazareth survived, unlike other Palestinian cities, because its leaders were less militant or because they preferred to surrender. Dunkelman's story proves that was not the case.*

*It is therefore a welcome development that a major Canadian newspaper, the Toronto Star, has revisited Dunkelman's role in Nazareth, even if its reporter, Mitch Potter, has contributed in his own way to the mythologising of Dunkelman in an article [headlined](#): “The Toronto man who saved Nazareth”.*

## Excised memories

It is worth bearing in mind, when we consider the attacks on Palestinian cities in 1948, how sensitive these matters were for Israel. Both Dunkelman and another commander, Yitzhak Rabin, who would later become a prime minister, wrote memoirs that included their experiences of the 1948 war.

Under pressure from the Israeli military authorities, both excised from their accounts the sections they had written dealing with the attacks on the Palestinian cities they were responsible for attacking. That was because those accounts were the proof, long denied by Israel and its supporters, that the Israeli leadership had intended and carried out the ethnic cleansing of most of the Palestinian population during 1948.

Some 750,000 Palestinians – out of 900,000 living inside the borders of what was to become the new Jewish state – were forced out and refused the right to return. In fact, the expulsion rate was far higher than the ostensible 80 per cent figure. Under pressure from the Vatican, Israel allowed many Christian refugees back; it did a land swap with Jordan in 1949 that brought more than 30,000 Palestinians into the new state; and many Palestinian refugees managed to sneak back to surviving communities like Nazareth and blend in with the local population in preparation for what they hoped would be their return to their villages.

Rabin led the attack on the Palestinian cities of Lydd and Ramleh, near Tel Aviv and today the mostly Jewish cities of Lod and Ramla. According to the missing section of his autobiography, later [publicised in the New York Times](#), Rabin asked David Ben Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, what to do with the 50,000 inhabitants of Lydd and Ramleh. Rabin recounted: "Ben Gurion waved his hand in a gesture that said: 'Drive them out!'" Rabin did exactly that, after a terrible massacre of hundreds of residents who were sheltering in a local mosque.

Ben Gurion, as the Israeli historian of the period Ilan Pappé has noted in his book *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, was careful not to leave a paper trail showing that he had ordered the expulsion of Palestinians. Instead, Israel would promote the myth that the Palestinian population had been ordered by neighbouring Arab leaders to flee.

#### Relieved of command

We do not know if Dunkelman had a similar meeting with Ben Gurion. What we do know, and the Star's account confirms, is that it had been made clear to Dunkelman that he was supposed to expel the inhabitants of Nazareth. Dunkelman disobeyed, and allowed the city to surrender. He was relieved of his command in Nazareth a day later.

The Star reports on a page referring to the attack on Nazareth that was removed from Dunkelman's 1976 memoir, *Dual Allegiance*. We know about it only because his ghostwriter, the late Israeli journalist Peretz Kidron, tried to interest the New York Times in Dunkelman's story, as a counterpart to Rabin's. The Times published the Rabin story but ignored Dunkelman's.

Interestingly, Dunkelman kept the account of his role in the Nazareth attack so quiet that, according to their quotes in the Star, neither his son nor his publisher at Macmillan knew about it.

Dunkelman writes that he was "shocked and horrified" at the order to depopulate Nazareth. He told his superior, Haim Laskov: "I would do nothing of the sort." He demanded that his replacement give his "word of honour" that the inhabitants would be allowed to stay, and concludes: "It seems that my disobedience did have some effect ... It seems to have given the high command time for second thoughts, which led them to the conclusion that it would indeed be wrong to expel. There was never any more talk of the evacuation plan, and the city's Arab citizens have lived there ever since."

#### 'Swallowing' Nazareth

In fact, we know what those "second thoughts" were. Stripped of a pretext to justify expulsions from Nazareth in the supposed "heat of battle", Ben Gurion came up with Plan B (or maybe it was Plan E, given that the ethnic cleansing was inspired by Plan Dalet, or D in

Hebrew).

In the wake of the 1948 war, during a near two-decade period of military government imposed on Israel's new Palestinian minority, Ben Gurion decided to establish Nazareth Ilit (Upper Nazareth) almost on top of Nazareth. It was the flagship of his "Judaisation of the Galilee" campaign. Ben Gurion was aghast not only that Nazareth had survived, but that it had doubled in size as thousands of refugees from surrounding villages fled to it seeking sanctuary.

According to Israeli state archives, Michael Michael, the military governor for Nazareth in this period, stated that the goal of Nazareth Ilit was to "swallow up" Nazareth. In short, Israel hoped retrospectively to destroy Nazareth as a Palestinian city, transforming it into another Lydd. The Jewish city of Nazareth Ilit would become with the main city, with Nazareth its own shadow ghetto. Despite Israel's best efforts, it largely failed in this goal, not least because it struggled to attract Israeli Jews to live next to a large Palestinian population .

Why was it so important for the Israeli leadership to destroy Nazareth? Because they feared that a Palestinian city – with its intellectuals, political activists, and advanced education system under the control of international Christian institutions – might encourage the emergence of an effective resistance, one that would be able to mount opposition to a state privileging Jews. Such a political and cultural capital might articulate to the outside world exactly what Israel was up to in Judaising places with large Palestinian populations like the Galilee.

### Mortar barrages

The Toronto Star's starry-eyed account of Dunkelman includes the following observation: "He won no medals for refusing to molest civilians [in Nazareth], nor any credit from his Israeli superiors." He is painted as a man who stuck close to the rules of war and avoided hurting civilians wherever possible in a series of "almost bloodless" attacks.

But in fact, as the Star notes in passing, Dunkelman's chief military talent was for making innovative use of "concentrated mortar barrages", a skill he learnt during the Second World War. In other words, he was an expert at firing large numbers of imprecise shells into populated areas, inevitably killing and wounding civilians.

Two Canadians have published posts making important criticisms of the Star's account.

Peter Larson, chair of Canada's National Education Committee on Israel-Palestine, [points out](#) that the operation in July 1948 led by Dunkelman was an attack on communities like Nazareth that were supposed to be firmly part of an Arab state under the terms of the United Nations Partition Plan, set out nine months earlier. As Larson writes, "Nazareth was forcibly incorporated into the new State of Israel contrary to the UN plan and despite the wishes of its residents."

### Protection for Christians

There is archival evidence to suggest that Dunkelman believed Christian Palestinians needed protecting, a view he did not extend to Muslim Palestinians.

Israeli historian Benny Morris notes a cable from Dunkelman as his troops marched through

the Galilee in November 1948: “I protest against the eviction of Christians from the village of Rama and its environs. We saw Christians at Rama in the fields thirsty for water and suffering from robbery. Other brigades expelled Christians from villages that did not resist and surrendered to our forces. I suggest that you issue an order to return the Christians to their villages.”

Morris mentions that under the influence of Dunkelman, among others, the Israeli army’s guidelines on the expulsion of Christian Palestinians changed over time.

In contrast to his decision to protect Nazareth and Christians, Dunkelman and his soldiers were ruthless in driving out Palestinians from many of the more than 500 Palestinian communities razed by Israel in 1948 and afterwards.

## War crimes

In Saffuriya, a large Muslim village a few kilometres from Nazareth that was attacked by the Seventh Brigade a day earlier, barrel bombs were dropped on the village as the residents were at home breaking that day’s Ramadan fast. All of Saffuriya’s inhabitants were driven out, and their homes destroyed. Today it is an exclusively Jewish farming community called Tzipori.

Without a doubt, Dunkelman directly participated in the mass expulsion of many tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians from their homes – a war crime by the laws of war that had recently emerged in the wake of the Second World War. He also admitted in his memoir that he allowed his troops to loot Palestinian property, another war crime.

But, while he does not refer to them in *Dual Allegiance*, Dunkelman is also implicated in some of the more notorious Israeli massacres of Palestinians in 1948.

In the worst case, in the village of Safsaf, north of Safad, [notes](#) Canadian journalist Dan Freeman-Moloy, Dunkelman had command responsibility as he led Operation Hiram in late October 1948. His troops’ behaviour in Safsaf and elsewhere is made clear in documents in Israel’s military archives uncovered by Morris for his book *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*.

Drawing on a declassified briefing from November 1948 by Israel Galili, Ben Gurion’s number two in the defence ministry, Morris writes of the actions of Dunkelman’s troops:

“At Saliha it appears that troops blew up a house, possibly the village mosque, killing 60-94 persons who had been crowded into it. In Safsaf, troops shot and then dumped into a well 50-70 villagers and POWs [prisoners of war]. In Jish, the troops apparently murdered about 10 Moroccan POWs (who had served with the Syrian Army) and a number of civilians, including, apparently, four Maronite Christians, and a woman and her baby.”

Morris concluded:

“These atrocities, mostly committed against Muslims, no doubt precipitated the flight of communities on the path of the IDF advance. ... What happened at Safsaf and Jish no doubt reached the villagers of Ras al Ahmar, ‘Alma, Deishum and al Malikiya hours before the Seventh Brigade’s columns. These villages, apart from ‘Alma, seem to have been completely or largely empty when the

IDF arrived.”

Dunkelman can no doubt take credit for Nazareth’s survival. But a full and proper historical accounting is still needed of the war crimes committed not only by Dunkelman but by those he answered to.

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