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A problem of all humanity

On January 22, 1942, The New York Times ran an editorial that rejected the establishment of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel. The immediate context was the idea of forming a Jewish brigade within the British Army. The Times based its objection, among other things, on the assumption that Jews did not need a state of their own, because once the Allies achieved a victory, they would be citizens with equal rights in their countries of residence, in accordance with the Atlantic Charter signed by the United States and Britain in August 1941. Hopes for a Jewish homeland would be fulfilled, the Times



Archive Photo: Yaakov Agor
Sharett. A man of words.

wrote, by "the winning of a new world in which Jews along with other religious and national minorities may live peacefully and happily in every nation, enjoying the full rights of other citizens."

In hindsight, there is something astonishing in the stance taken by the newspaper in the largest Jewish city in the world, and even at the time it caused profound shock both there and in Jerusalem.

Moshe Shertok – who would later change his name to Sharett and serve as Israel's first foreign minister and second prime minister – submitted a lengthy response to the Times, the gist of which was that resolving the Jewish problem does not concern only Jews, but all of humanity. Anti-Semitism was not invented by Hitler, he wrote; indeed,

the standing of the Jews in Europe had been steadily eroding over the previous 50 years. Democratic rule and human rights will be endangered as long as the Jews are not granted a country of their own, he added, and as long as they continue to serve as a target for demagogues who wish to sow suspicions and hatred between classes and peoples.

As head of the Jewish Agency's political department, Sharett guided Zionist policy during the Holocaust period as well. The Zionist Library, which published a selection of his writings from this era, which ends abruptly, as though Sharett had not left any documents behind after June 1942. This was probably not by chance: The Holocaust period was one of utter helplessness, a low point in the history of the Zionist movement, whose priorities at that time also seem problematic from today's standpoint.

The Moshe Sharett Heritage Society has just brought out the initial volume in a series that will include for the first time documents he wrote dating back to the Holocaust period ("Ma'avak Medini," edited by Shifra Kolatt and Yaakov Sharett). This is the first of many volumes, because Sharett was a man of many words. He spoke at meetings, gave lectures and speeches, and wrote a lot: reports, memos, letters, diaries. Naturally he ascribed great importance to his writing. In May 1942, he sought advice from David Ben-Gurion, then chairman of the World Zionist Organization, who was not in the country at the time: Should the Zionist leadership use the phrase "Jewish state" in its official publications? A cautious man, Sharett himself did not recommend this, lest it heighten Arab pressure on Britain, and intensify the debate within the Jewish public.

It is not known how Ben-Gurion replied.

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