

## “Hebrew Labour” (AVODA IVRIT) as a pivotal Zionist instrumental concept

Ideological teaching and social structuring in the Labour Zionist Youth Movement  
Reading the movement’s official magazine *BaMaaleh* 1926 – 1935

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### Abstract

Several decades prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, in 1948, the notion of **Hebrew Labour** [*Avoda Ivrit*] associated with “the Conquest of Labour” [*Kibbush Ha’Avoda*] was a core component of the Zionist Labour Movement’s ideology and practice. The concept represents a demand that all paid employment in Jewish owned enterprises, as well as a proportional part of government works, be performed exclusively by Jews – mostly young Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe who arrived in Palestine from the 1890s onwards - based on their Jewish (“Hebrew”) ethnicity.

Labour Zionism established itself as the hegemonic political grouping in the Zionist project before the establishment of the state, and kept its leadership position in the state’s first thirty years (until 1977). In Labour-Zionist ideology, the struggle for **Hebrew Labour** is attached both to the idea of establishing and solidifying a Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel/Palestine and to the aspiration to radically alter the traditional socio-economic structure of Jewish society. In practice, this struggle amounted to denying labour positions to indigenous Arab-Palestinian workers. The concept “*Avoda Ivrit*” was skilfully used by the Zionist Labour movement to enhance its political appeal and support its claim for the hegemony of the Zionist pre-state Jewish presence in Palestine. Presented as an essential combination of national and socialist idealism<sup>1</sup>, it laid the foundations for the demand for ethnic-religious separation and the eventual *ethnic cleansing of Palestine* (Pappe, 2007). The image of the indigenous population as “alien” and undesirable became imbued in the settler community’s collective weltanschauung.

The concept encapsulates the demand for pure ethnic-religious segregation and Jewish supremacy. The present research aims to follow its positioning as a well-accepted perception, camouflaged as an idealistic notion, bent on social reform. Ultra-nationalism in present-day Israel, universally attributed to the political “far right”, has its sound base in the advocating and teaching of the

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<sup>1</sup> In a period that still did not read menace into the combination of the two. See Sternhell, 1995:173, referring to the writings of Georges Sorel.

Labour movement, self-described as the “Israeli Zionist left”. This study hopes to illuminate this rarely noticed perspective.

The Zionist Labour Movement, fully associated in the **Histadrut** – “Hebrew Workers Labour union” (established in 1920 as a union of all self-described socialist political currents) skilfully promoted the concept of **Hebrew Labour**, charging it with positive connotations<sup>2</sup> and turning it into a useful political tool against all Zionist challengers.

The present research presents the campaign propagating **Hebrew Labour** by following ten years (1926 -1935) of a Hebrew language publication that was the mouthpiece of the *Histadrut*’s youth-movement organisation. **BaMaaleh** [Up the hill], first launched in 1926, was the official publication of the Labouring Youth [*Ha’Noar Ha’Oved*]. It carried articles and speeches by the most prominent leaders of the Labour Movement, including David Ben Gurion, Berl Katznelson, Yitzhak Tabenkin and Israel Galilee, as well as literary works by the canonised writers of the epoch.

Intent on modelling the ideological-political nurture of young Jewish people, **BaMaaleh** offers a perfect perspective on the teaching, advocating, and indoctrination of the principle of **Hebrew Labour**: fervently Zionist and nationalist; advocating its unique brand of socialist nationalism (Sternhell, 1998).

Reading the first 10 years of the publication offers a timeframe clear of historical events that later became pivotal for Zionist advocacy. The period 1926 -1935 precedes the second world war horrors – the Shoah, often quoted as a justification for the insistence on a pure “Jewish State”. It also precedes the 1936-1939 Arab Revolt and the 1948 war and Nakba, also often quoted as generators (rather than outcomes) of Jewish insistence on ethnic purity.

Promoting the discourse of **Hebrew Labour**, **BaMaaleh** created a consensus around the ideology of ethnic segregation, aggressively and successfully combining elements of European-like disdain of “natives”, common to all settler-colonialist societies, with traditional Jewish cultural norms that instruct the self-segregation of the community and ban “*mixing with the gentiles*”.

In concepts used by Homi K. Bhabha, **BaMaaleh** offers a sample of “*colonial discourse*” which was “*crucial to the binding of a range of differences and discriminations that inform the discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchization*” (Bhabha, 1990:72).

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<sup>2</sup> The positive sentiment was preserved well into the second millennium, as can be learnt from a “national” project of Hebrew Labour for [young Israelis launched in 2011](#).