

The Last Chapter: Nathan Alterman and the Six-Day War

FOR OBVIOUS REASONS, NATHAN ALTERMAN'S admirers, including most literary scholars, tend to forget, overlook, or suppress the last chapter of his life. Despite extensive debate over his works during the last two decades, only a handful of studies have actually dealt with the period of his transition from an all-inspiring poet into an angry columnist whose writing, as well as public activity, were totally mobilized toward one overriding idea: the concept of Greater Israel.¹ Alterman's devotees regarded this step with a double qualm: they were dismayed at his poetry's unreserved permutation into journalistic polemics; and many were upset that Alterman, identified for over a generation with the pragmatic mainstream of the Labor Movement (Mapai), had now metamorphosed into the most vocal spokesman of radical ideology distinctly allied to the Revisionist Right.²

Alterman was not alone among writers traditionally bound to Mapai who, in the aftermath of the Six-Day War, immediately began to empathize with the idea of Greater Israel, insisting that the Israeli Government retain the *status quo* in the recently captured areas. For Alterman, however, the Six-Day War changed his entire life. In *Nathan Alterman—the Poet as Leader*, Moshe Shamir presents documentary details of Alterman's life in the period following the Six-Day War, when the poet was totally immersed in organizing the Greater Israel Movement and composing its manifesto. "He took upon himself every role, was undeterred by any commitment, and overcame obstacles that previously he would not even have dreamed of tackling," wrote Shamir. "Yet at the same time he was always wary not to appear as a solitary fighter, a *primus inter pares* . . ." After the manifesto's publication, Alterman remained active in the movement, participating in its meetings, lobbying politicians, and contributing to its journal, *Zot Ha'Aretz* [This is the Land]. But the major expression of his new stage in life is illustrated in the scores of articles he published almost weekly in the newspaper *Ma'ariv*,

where he revealed himself to be one of most influential thinkers and founding fathers of the “Greater Israel” idea that was crystallizing in Israel’s public discourse following the war. Shortly after his death, all his articles, some of which had attracted bitter and angry response, were collected in a thick volume entitled *The Three-Way Thread*, edited and published by his ideological colleague Menachem Dorman with the clear intent of bequeathing upon the texts the authority of a spiritual legacy.⁴

Alterman’s cognitive shift to Greater Israel was a far-reaching change in his ideational world, and Moshe Shamir’s assertion that this ideology is concealed in his earlier works cannot be verified. In diametric contrast to Uri Zvi Greenberg,⁵ he never denounced the establishment of the partitioned state, nor mourned the loss of East Jerusalem and the Old City in the War of Independence, and on no occasion did he express a longing for holy places or land left outside of Israel’s jurisdiction at the war’s end. Since the mid-1940s, he completely backed David Ben-Gurion, clearly preferring his pragmatic, constructive policy to radical ideologies on the Right or Left.⁶ In *Poems of the City of the Dove* (1957), a 157 page work that reflected his absolute identification with the partitioned state developing in its first decade, not once is “Jerusalem” mentioned, whereas the prosaic city of Tel-Aviv and bleak new development towns are presented as symbols of what he labeled the “Era of Regeneration.”⁷ The Sinai Campaign can also be employed as a test-case for discerning his attitude toward occupied territories and borders. The capture of the Sinai desert in the autumn of 1956 filled him with emotion, and he announced in his first publication after the war (with reference to Mt. Sinai), “Possession of that lofty mountain/ Is written in the chronicles of the Hebrew people/ Who in their childhood saw it smoldering.” However, after Ben-Gurion’s decision to withdraw from the peninsula, Alterman switched his reasoning, adopted the pragmatic line of compromise, and even took a major part in the public debate against opposition to withdrawal. “There are alternatives for the map and the land,” he said in a newspaper column in March 1957, in which he suggested that geographical boundaries were not permanent borders, and that the achievements of the Sinai Campaign would reach fruition in various aspects of Israeli life, not necessarily through territorial acquisition.⁸

In this light, Alterman may be regarded as having experienced rebirth (or “conversion”) in the context that William James employs the term in his book *Varieties of Religious Experience*.⁹ Alterman, and others, went through a catharsis during the Six-Day War 1967 due primarily to the dramatic transition from tension and anxiety throughout the pre-war period of waiting to euphoria at the lightening victory and its concrete military gains: the

capture of the West Bank, Sinai, the Golan Heights, and the re-unification of Jerusalem. Much has been written about the effects of this intense experience on Israeli society during and after the war, and on the psychological, intellectual, religious, and political implications it had on the Israeli public, individuals, and various social groups. Those who had believed in the idea of a Greater Israel before the war and had long felt a profound psychological malaise now interpreted the war as a belated justification of their beliefs. However, for those who had not embraced the concept of Greater Israel in the past, the war decisively changed their *Weltanschauung* and created a binding obligation toward the new ideology. The extremism of this change can be explained by Alterman's special, personal circumstances in the years prior to the war, when he suffered mortification at Ben-Gurion's resignation from national leadership in the wake of an Israeli intelligence fiasco in Egypt in 1954 known as the Lavon Affair. In his cognitive construct, the resignation was interpreted as a deathblow to Zionism's basic values and nation-building, against whose abandonment Alterman had already admonished in the 1950s. The Six-Day War created an unparalleled opportunity to revitalize an ideological vacuum which, he felt, had lamentably enveloped the state in its second decade.¹⁰

Alterman was actually the first to raise the issue of Greater Israel on the public agenda immediately after the war. His article "Facing an Unprecedented Reality" in *Ma'ariv* on 16 June, only five days after the last shots were fired, predated articles by other writers such as Yuval Ne'eman, Eliezer Livneh, Moshe Shamir, and Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, all of whom sought to advance the idea of the complete integration of Greater Israel in light of the new reality at the war's end.¹¹ Alterman's position on the war's results appears in the article, whose scathing phrases were widely quoted by proponents of Greater Israel. "This victory," he asserted, "is not only about returning to Jews their nation's ancient and exalted possessions, [for] they are engraved in its memory and the profundity of its history. More than anything else, this victory . . . has erased the division between the State of Israel and the Land of Israel . . . all that was missing in this historical connection was for the Jewish people to weave, together with what has been gained, the unseverable three-way thread."¹² In concise form, this declaration expressed the main ideas that Alterman would reiterate in future articles; it was also the signal to commence activity. He began holding private meetings to win supporters to his position. On 10 August, he was the first speaker to step up to the podium at a meeting which took place at the Israeli Journalists' Club in Tel-Aviv "for a discussion on basic questions of contemporary relevancy following the war." A month later he actively participated



Nathan Alterman, poet and playwright.
Courtesy of the Government Press Office

in formulating the movement's manifesto (published 22 September 1967). He also took part in organizing the movement's founding convention at Tel-Aviv's Mann Auditorium on 21 February 1968. In an historic photograph, the camera-shy Alterman can be seen standing on stage in the auditorium next to figures such as Israel Eldad,¹³ Moshe Shamir, Rabbi Moshe Zvi Neriah,¹⁴ Oved Ben-Ami,¹⁵ and Uri Zvi Greenberg.

With enormous tenacity and unflagging intellectual exertion, Alterman consolidated the new ideology and defined its political goals. During the years being surveyed, he collected and collated scores of articles and essays from the Israeli and foreign press that dealt, directly or indirectly, with the post-Six-Day War reality. He focused on questions such as the borders, the Palestinian problem, security issues, the military's conduct in the Occupied Territories, Israeli-Diaspora relations, and the political alignment within Israel. His files from this period contain dozens of newspaper clippings, and *inter alia*, sections of speeches by Moshe Dayan,¹⁶ Ezer Weizman,¹⁷ and Yitzhak Tabenkin¹⁸; articles and reviews of the Allon Plan—which stated that the Jordan Valley rift and Jewish settlements in the Hebron area would remain under Israeli rule—and the Palestinian Manifesto (Yehoshafat Har-kabi's translation); commentary from *New Outlook*, in which the Israeli Left vented its views; and, interviews with political figures on both the Right and Left. Along with his methodical collection of journalistic items, Alterman arranged “work notebooks,” as in the past, in which he expansively summarized entire sections from newspapers, radio broadcasts, discussions he attended, and his impressions from fact-finding tours or meetings (with

Dayan, Peres, or Haim Herzog, for example). The summaries were accompanied by a critical analysis whose main theme was to challenge contemporary positions from the perspective of Greater Israel. While preparing his articles for *Ma'ariv*, Alterman would execute exhaustive research that included data gathering, clarification of terminology and concepts, and sometimes even chapter headings, in which he scrupulously detailed the arguments and the gamut of eye-witness accounts intended for the article.¹⁹

The basic premises in his compendium of articles, *The Three-Way Thread*, revolve around the Jewish people's claim to its historical and natural right to Greater Israel, a widespread sentiment in public and political discourse on the Right and the Right's periphery following the Six-Day War. Alterman continuously repeats "our undeniable right to this land," and defines the West Bank as the "Cradle of the Nation" and the heart of the Land of Israel, while occasionally pointing out the primary connection between the Sinai desert and the nation's antiquity. Although the Golan Heights are seldom evoked, he includes them within the same territorial sweep called "the Land of Israel." Alterman waxes exceedingly nostalgic over the "West Bank," a term he enlists as "a pseudonym for the Land of the Fathers, symbolizing the depth of the relationship between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel." In this context, Jerusalem, blatantly abandoned in his earlier writings, is given special attention when he speaks of "renewing Jewish links with the back streets of the Old City." He proposes transforming the 28th of the Hebrew month of Iyyar into a holiday commemorating "the liberation of Greater Jerusalem, and the redemption of the Temple Mount and Western Wall." In the "Western Wall" debate that flared up after the war, Alterman adopts a reverential attitude toward the site, which he presents as "a vestige of the House of Prayer, a relic of one of the most elevated symbols of faith's incomparability and power." At the same time, he implores the secular public to recognize "the religious content still emanating from behind our Wall, peeking through the cracks in the stones." Touring the West Bank, he recoils from foreign signposts pointing to "holy sites." Despite their engraving in stone, he regards them as merely temporary markers compared to the impromptu Hebrew signs—a tin slab scrawled in yellow: "To the Machpelah Cave" (instead of the English "Tomb of Abraham"). In his eyes, the Hebrew versions, and only they, meld with eternity.²⁰

The focus on the historical argument as the basis for demanding a Greater Israel, coming on the heels of the religious argument, reduced, *ipso facto*, the gravity of the security assertion, but Alterman, the veteran activist, did not hesitate from making use of it. Like other key supporters of Greater

Israel, he also employed instrumental rhetoric buffered by security considerations for a rationalization of his fundamentalist position, but not as a substitution for it.²¹ He criticized Israel's governments under Levi Eshkol and Golda Meir because of their exaggerated reliance on security pretexts for legitimation of continued rule in the Occupied Territories. Although this undoubtedly appeared sensible to him, the overuse of the security argument raised his concern that the ideological, historical claim, which he viewed as the basis for political ownership of the Territories captured in the war, would be overshadowed. "If these Territories are a barrier," wrote Alterman in reference to the security argument, "[then] they separate us not from peace, but from war." Nevertheless, he emphasized that retaining the Territories stemmed not only from security reasons. "The main rationale for our possession of them is both a basic one and a multi-faceted, moral one . . . while the security argument is only its armor-bearer."²² In this spirit Alterman jotted down in his notebook: "The prescription not to hand [them] back until peace talks [begin] is worse than it seems—it assumes that the Territories do not [really] belong to us and are only occupied territories."

This led to the maximal demand not to withdraw from the captured territories, and to categorically reject the equation "land for peace." Although Alterman was aware of the political logic in avoiding formal annexation, on principle he urged taking every step possible to hasten the integration of the Occupied Territories into the State of Israel. This was his interpretation of Defense Minister Moshe Dayan's policy, and explains his support for it. Above all Alterman advocated the idea of settlement, and time and again he called for launching a massive settlers' movement. He was the loyal and tenacious backer of each outpost, frontier colony, or civilian settlement established in the Territories. During the week of Passover, 1968, Alterman and Benny Marshak²³ accompanied Labor Minister Yigal Allon on a visit to settlers in Hebron celebrating the holiday, and who were remaining in the city surreptitiously. The Hebron settlement had always been a topic of dispute, and Alterman's feeling toward it provides the acid-test of his attitude toward settlements in general. When the military government evicted three settlers for constructing a kiosk in the city without a license, Alterman claimed that the punishment meted out "violated the basic laws between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel"; therefore, the very act of eviction was an immoral, illegal act.²⁴ As it turned out, he was defending the Hebron settlement, although it had been set up in violation of a government ruling, while, at the same time, he was also defending Yigal Allon's personal position to support the Hebron settlers. In Alterman's opinion,

Allon's stand was "an expression loyal and true to the Israeli government, its quintessence and destiny."²⁶

However, the main instrument, according to Alterman's strategy, for realizing the idea of Greater Israel was mass immigration—the third apex of "the three-way, unseverable thread" theory he had developed in his first post-war article. Following this, on 7 July 1967, he dramatically declared that "the battle for the Jewish people" should be nothing less than "the urgent and inevitable continuation of the Six-Day War,"²⁷ a concept he repeated in a speech before the founding members of the Greater Israel Movement. In the protocol, Alterman avers that "since the last day of the Six-Day War, it has become impossible to be a Jew, and it is forbidden to be a Jew, if we succumb complacently to the fact that, due to the lack of tens of thousands or a few hundred thousand Jews, we shall have to sever Jewish history at the moment of its climax."²⁸ His basic assumption is reproduced in detail in scores of articles that explicitly demand that the Zionist Movement resanction the principle of "negation of the Diaspora," and that echo the unquestioning support he had given to Ben-Gurion during his famous debate with the Zionist Movement on this subject in the 1950s. Only mass immigration, especially from the Western World, would create a meaningful answer to what he termed "the demographic threat" and guarantee the Jewish people possession of its historical homeland. This was also the theme of his book *The Last Mask*, published in 1968, in which he satirically described his tense expectation of the arrival of mass immigration and his accompanying anxiety should it fail to appear.²⁹

As Alterman was consolidating his stand on the Arab question, he maneuvered between a humanist outlook and one that was radical, inflexible, nationalist. In the past he had radiated an honest, compassionate attitude toward the Israeli Arab minority, more than once citing iniquities perpetrated by the military government. He was among the first critics of the Kfar Kasem Incident³⁰ and did not refrain from confronting Ben-Gurion with the facts surrounding the brutal slaying. To all appearances Alterman remained true to this position as he was mindful to include in the Greater Israel's manifesto the guarantee of "freedom and equality" and non-discrimination to all residents of the country. He published numerous articles in *Ma'ariv* in this spirit. In one article, close to the time of the war, he wrote, "No doubt our first and foremost conclusion is the obligation to grant these populations civil rights, legal defense, freedom of religion, etc. . . ." ³¹ Yet, in the same breath, he denied Palestinian Arabs the right to self-determination, claiming that their rejection of the Israeli government was not reason enough to negate the Jewish people's past and future rights to the Land of

Israel. “There is a factual and ideological emptiness in that artificial and spurious population going by the misnomer of ‘the Palestinian Arab nation.’”³² Alterman often traveled to the Territories on fact-finding tours, visiting the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, the Jordan Valley, and Jericho. At the end of one of these trips, he said to Shimon Peres, “We saw the Land. It is a vacant entity awaiting our activity. This is *our* historical entity, and not that of the Palestinians, who were invented only recently.”³³ He repeated this mantra in various contexts, always as a matter of principle beyond compromise.

For Alterman, the right to the Land of Israel belonged solely to the Jewish people. The “Palestinian nation” did not even exist for him; therefore there was no justification for granting the Arabs any form of sovereignty in the territorial expanse between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Devotion to this vision dulled even his well-known feeling toward the “other” as he unconsciously retreated from the concepts of “freedom and equality” to which he had once been wholeheartedly committed. No longer did he deplore injustice perpetrated on [Arab] residents in the Territories (in some cases he went so far as to validate them), and he would habitually praise “the liberal government,” as he referred to it, in the Occupied Territories. When other writers decried the eviction of Arabs and voiced gloomy prognoses about the conqueror-conquered relationship, Alterman responded to them with contempt and disgust.³⁴

The more the ideal of Greater Israel approached the zenith of Alterman’s value system, the more pronounced was the erosion of the democracy and the rule of law in his outlook. In his meticulous analysis of the Greater Israel Movement’s ideological platform, Dan Miron has pointed out that the document’s anti-democratic character begins with the proscription of the right of any government in Israel to decide on the future of the Territories.³⁵ Alterman, as already mentioned, actively participated in the formulation of the document and unconditionally supported its argument. Even in his opening speech to the Israeli Journalists’ Club he asserted that, “We are not free men to decide how to behave, not on the government level, the military level, or the personal level. We are obligated to act this way just as our own biography obligates us.”³⁶ This was an echo of phrases he had penned six days earlier in *Ma’ariv*. In his debate over the term “Occupied Territories,” which he opposed on principle, Alterman professed that the essence of the Territories was that “they occupy us. They embrace us in the arms of the past and future and we are not free men to detach ourselves from them either willingly or through decision.”³⁷ Elsewhere he stated that in these “Territories no state law, whether human or divine, has the power to

reverse our right to settle there . . .”³⁸ From such declarations, it becomes clear that Alterman’s political dictionary, as it matured in these years, is no longer in harmony with the democratic tradition. He presumes the existence of a transcendental, quasi-religious sanction that unequivocally annuls the legitimacy of the general will and elected institutions as the highest factors in determining national policy. This tenet influenced his judgment of events whenever a clash flared up between the legal government and activists in the Greater Israel Movement, such as in the Hebron settlement affair, when twice he stood on the side of the law-breakers in defense of the sanctified and eternal decree of Israel.

Alterman’s ideological “rebirth” required a radical reform of his political orientation. Above all, the Six-Day War signified his rift with Ben-Gurion, where personal admiration and total acceptance of his policies had been Alterman’s hallmark for over a generation. His identification with Ben-Gurion reached its climax during the Lavon Affair, when Alterman waged a relentless struggle to salvage the reputation of the disparaged and rejected Prime Minister. It was re-asserted in the period of waiting before the Six-Day War, when he chose to join the public call to restore Ben-Gurion to the helm of government. On a personal level, Alterman cherished his loyalty to the “Old Man” even after the war, and his famous essay “The Riverbed of Zin,” dedicated to Ben-Gurion on his 83rd birthday, is one of the most outstanding pieces in Hebrew literature dealing with this political figure.³⁹ In addition, Alterman was wont to quote Ben-Gurion and search the various junctures in his life in a desperate quest to legitimize his own current ultra-nationalist stance. But on all aspects of interpreting the post-war reality, Ben-Gurion ceased to be a source of authority for him. Ben-Gurion believed in returning the Territories, excluding East Jerusalem and the Golan, to the Arabs. This bewildered, if not demoralized, Alterman; and more than once he attempted to fathom Ben-Gurion and grant his view extenuating explanations, while, on other occasions, he tried to show Ben-Gurion his error. “I’m not coming to proffer advice, but I wish to express my feelings, common perhaps to many, that Ben-Gurion’s voice needs to be heard now in a different way, both on the matter at hand and on its underlying intention,” Alterman wrote in November 1968.⁴⁰ However, excluding specific references to points of disagreement between the two men, Alterman’s articles in *The Three-Way Thread* reflect a blatant retreat from Ben-Gurion’s brand of Zionism. Ben-Gurion viewed politics as a balance of forces, in which the fervent struggle for national revival and political independence was tempered with pragmatism and realpolitik, and where the concept of partition became, in effect, one of its main principles.

Under these circumstances, Alterman searched for other heroes. Moshe Dayan had gained renewed respectability for his practical policy-making in the Territories, no less than for his rhetoric peppered with historical and even religious motifs, which were justifiably interpreted by Alterman as non-rejection of the Greater Israel idea. But the intellectual vacuum left by Ben-Gurion was filled for him by Yitzhak Tabenkin and his HaKibbutz HaMe'uchad Movement, who was traditionally supportive of Greater Israel and an outspoken ideological backer. Even in the past, Alterman had expressed admiration for HaKibbutz HaMe'uchad's role in nation-building and had gained many friends in the movement, whose publishing house had been the main sponsor and repository of his works for decades.⁴¹ Having given the best years of his life to Mapai, Alterman now found himself associated with values in that section of the movement that had consistently refused to buckle under to Ben-Gurion's authoritarianism. During the Annual Council of HaKibbutz HaMe'uchad on 9 November 1967, which resolved to establish settlements in the "Liberated Territories," Alterman wrote of it as an event that would be engraved on the "scroll of life," for it was "an original and determined protest call by an organized, firmly established body against the obfuscation of principles and values that has taken hold of us."⁴² Before writing this, Alterman had summarized in detail the Council's debates (apparently from their publication in *LaMevchav*), and quoted part of a speech made by Eitan Lev (Kibbutz Zova). "Why isn't the example of Nazareth Ilite⁴³ just as valid for Hebron, Jenin, Nablus, and other cities? Why do we not propose this? . . . It is the only way there will ever be a Greater Israel." Alterman underlined this remark and added next to it in parentheses, "To note [that the Israeli Government's] foreign policy . . . is sabotaging the internal, vital, urgent, necessary, determining activity." As HaKibbutz HaMe'uchad's leader, Yitzhak Tabenkin had been ignored by Alterman in earlier works; but in June 1969, Alterman wrote that, of all the veteran members in the Labor Movement—which undoubtedly included Ben-Gurion—"we now find only one personality whose voice preserves the firmly established link, the Zionist who did not lose his way in the current quandary."⁴⁴ In the name of the Greater Israel ideal, Alterman advocated a departure from the hostility toward all shades of Revisionism, and even spoke in favor of radical Rightists Israel Eldad and Uri Zvi Greenberg. This was his rationale for supporting the coalition in the mid-1960s between right-wing political parties and Mapai (Dayan, Galili, Allon, Carmel). But when it came to choosing among the coalition's sundry players at the onset of the fifth elections to the Knesset, Alterman made a scrupulous study of the field and decided to cross the lines. He turned to

readers of his column in *Ma'ariv* and urged them not to cast their ballot for the “all-encompassing” Alignment (which included Ben-Gurion’s Rafi List), but to vote instead for a list with a single message. Although he preferred not to mention his party of choice, he dropped broad hints to readers for whom the idea of “Greater Israel” was dear that the political force deserving of support at this threshold was none other than Gahal, Menachem Begin’s party.⁴⁵

In the struggle for the idea of “Greater Israel,” Alterman refused to be identified with a particular political line, but regarded himself as one who was involved in an ideological battle for the very survival and realization of Zionist ideology. Forgetting Israel’s endurance and prosperity for nineteen years along the old Partition borders, a daily reality he had lauded regularly in the “Seventh Column” (his weekly column on current events, written in poetry and appearing in *Davar*), he now promulgated the claim for Greater Israel as the only feasible interpretation of Zionism. To prove it, he asked his readers to perceive the territorial conquests of the Six-Day War not merely as the undeniable culmination of the War of Independence, but even more so as the natural, legitimate, and inexorable succession of Jewish history since the days of Herzl. “. . . the process which has led to our presence today in Judea and Samaria [the West Bank] includes not only [King] Hussein [of Jordan] and his machinations, but other causes too . . . such as the designs of the first Zionist pioneers, the Biluists⁴⁶ and pioneers of the Second and Third Aliyah⁴⁷ when these lands ‘that we possess today’ were the main reasons for their immigration to the Land of Israel . . . and one may add that our settlement there today has occurred less from [King] Hussein’s shortsightedness . . . than due to the far-reaching vision of Herzl, the prophet of political Zionism . . .”⁴⁸ One is left with the impression that Alterman sensed the slightest whiff of surrender of the June 1967 territorial gains as tantamount to questioning the basic premises of Zionism and its eight decades of accomplishments. He adamantly refused to discern between areas acquired at the end of the War of Independence and those that had just been won. When the HaShomer HaTza’ir Movement⁴⁹ formulated a peace plan based on territorial withdrawal, he recorded in his notebook that “[The] question is why the rights of two nations should prevent Jews from settling in the Jordan Valley . . . Why was [settlement] allowed [in the Jezreel Valley] . . . for [Kibbutz] Merchavia [the center of the HaShomer HaTza’ir Movement]? Why should the residents of Hebron have to vacate the land, but not settlers of Baram?⁵⁰ It would seem that, if anyone is going to be evacuated, it should be [Kibbutz] Baram’s members rather than the [Jewish] settlers of Hebron.” This characteristic statement accurately reflects Alterman’s posi-

tion that withdrawal from any recently captured area would necessarily result in the delegitimization of Zionism, the collapse of the Return to Zion dream, and the termination of the State of Israel.

Parallel to this, Alterman led an all-out campaign against attempts by the Zionist Left and other international groups to rewrite the Zionist narrative on the basis of “parity” between the Jewish and Palestinian claims for possession of the Land of Israel. In the previously noted conversation with Shimon Peres, Alterman declared that, if it is only a difference of opinion between two nations—“the Palestinian people who was supposedly expelled from its land, and the Jewish people who supposedly expelled them . . . then we have erred the whole way.”⁵¹ He reiterated this argument in his articles in numerous ways while contending with those who supported the other position, among them Uri Avnery,⁵² Aryeh Eliav,⁵³ and Jacob Talmon.⁵⁴ In his article “The Empty Formula,” Alterman disputed the interpretation that “the Jewish people and Arab-Palestinian people were twin entities with equal rights to *political* possession of the country, more explicitly to the entire Land of Israel, in all areas of government and political sovereignty.”

One week later, in a seminal piece on “the conflict,” Alterman asserted that the “concept which views the Arab-Israeli conflict as a tragedy, as an entanglement that both sides are stuck in,” is perhaps correct from a humane standpoint. But the moment it reverts to the political realm, “[then] nothing could be more fallacious and spurious.”⁵⁵ The re-formulation of Zionist narrative, which transformed before his own eyes into a social vogue, especially among the intellectuals, was seen as a genuine threat to the project of national revival in the Land of Israel and to the future of the State of Israel. Alterman termed this “de-Zionization,” and on another occasion he chose the expression “self de-Zionization, by which he meant self-denial of the Zionist justification. In his opinion, this would lead, sooner or later, to casting doubt on Israel’s very right to exist even within the pre-1967 borders.

In a terse and acrid poem composed in this period barren of poetry, Alterman presented a gloomy prophecy of the conceivable demise of the Jewish state, which would transpire due to a moral crisis in Zionism. He drew upon themes from his series *The Three-Way Thread*. “. . . Then said the devil: The besieged/ How can I overcome him?/ With his courage and skills of action/ And weapons and his wise advice . . .” And he (the devil) replied thus: “I will not enervate his strength,/ Neither bridle nor bit will I fasten/ Nor faintheartedness will I plant in him . . ./ Only this will I do: I’ll cloud his brain/ So he’ll forget that justice is with him./ Thus spoke the devil./ And the Heavens paled in trepidation/ Upon observing him rise/ To execute his stratagem.”⁵⁶

Alterman restated these claims in his article "The New Hobby,"⁵⁷ pursuing the argument with his ideological rivals, led by Aryeh Eliav, who acknowledged the Palestinian Arab people's existence. ". . . The moment we admit to the fiction of Palestinian nationalism," Alterman wrote with great bitterness, "that is when Zionism will be equated with the plunder of a living nation's homeland. To the extent that we now assist in implanting this consciousness in the world and in our own inner awareness, the more we invalidate the historical, humane basis of Zionism and consign it only to our bayonets."⁵⁸ These were practically Alterman's last words. In mid-March he was hospitalized in Tel-Aviv, and in the course of a complicated intestinal operation lost consciousness and never recovered. He died on 28 March at the age of 59. In the mourning period that followed his sudden death, the presence of the Greater Israel Movement was dominant, for its supporters felt his departure as the loss of their leader and spiritual guide. Almost the whole issue of *Zot Ha'Aretz* (10 April 1970) was devoted to Alterman, and among the essays on his character and political doctrine, one entire page was dedicated to quotations from his writing and speeches on the idea of Greater Israel, as well as several lines from his last article, "The New Hobby." Thirty days after his death, and on the first anniversary of his burial, the movement convened memorial services in his honor that received notice in its publication. In a special memorial issue of *Zot Ha'Aretz*, Harel Fisch wrote: "throughout his life, Nathan Alterman was partner to our national and public life. In the end, he achieved the pinnacle of his public activity by becoming one of the founding fathers of the Greater Israel Movement. He was its founder!" To remove any doubt from the heart, he added, "the moment of truth has arrived to declare outright: he personified the movement and the movement has been orphaned of its father."⁵⁹ This acknowledgment gained further validity twenty years after the Six-Day War, when Moshe Shamir, one of the key figures in the nationalist, right-wing Techiya [Renaissance] Party, chose to write a whole book on Alterman, *The Poet as Leader*. "I permit myself, I compel myself, I am justified as one who tells things as they are," his introduction opened, "in trying to understand and interpret the spiritual, exhilaratingly moral vision of the poet who rose to become a guiding spirit for his nation."⁶⁰

It seems that memory lapse, insouciance, and abnegation of all aspects of the last chapter in the beloved poet's life by a large number of his loyal readers cannot obscure the facts presented here, nor lessen their significance. Alterman, who began his career as a lyrical poet and for decades assumed the role of semi-official spokesman for "Rational Zionism," navigated himself, in his final years, into becoming one of the principal archi-

pects of a nationalist ideology wedded to messianic aspirations. Menachem Dorman used to call Alterman “Nathan the Wise,” after the protagonist who personified wisdom, kindness, and nobility in the celebrated late-eighteenth century drama by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing,⁶¹ but it seems that, in his final years, Alterman’s path was no longer distinguished by the liberal values of tolerance and brotherhood identified with the heroic Jewish figure that Lessing created. Dogmatism, fundamentalist rhetoric, denial of the “other,” and political radicalism were characteristics that Lessing, the noble and staunch representative of the spirit of the Enlightenment, endeavored to avoid. The revolution that took root in Alterman’s personality and his world-view requires, therefore, delineation and definition. Such an enterprise will be a major step toward constructing the biography of this great writer, and by no less a measure will it add an invaluable chapter to the intellectual history of Israel in the post-Six-Day War period.

NOTES

*All references are in Hebrew unless otherwise noted. The English translation of this article was made by Moshe Tlamim.

1. A comprehensive analysis of the “Greater Israel” concept in its historical context can be found in Arye Naor’s doctoral thesis, *The Greater Israel Ideology since the Six-Day War* (Jerusalem, 1997).

2. Founded in 1925 by Ze’ev Jabotinsky as an offshoot of the London-based Zionist Executive, the Revisionist Movement demanded that the future state’s territory stretch across both banks of the Jordan River. Revisionism emphasized the military features of Zionism and the need to raise a powerful Jewish defense force.

3. Moshe Shamir, *Nathan Alterman—the Poet as Leader* (Tel-Aviv, 1988), 160. Shamir [b. 1921] is a Hebrew author, playwright, and editor.

4. Nathan Alterman, *The Three-Way Thread—Articles 1967–1970* (Tel-Aviv, 1971). See also, Menachem Dorman’s article, “Nathan Alterman’s Book of Strife and Contention,” *Ha’Aretz* (literary supplement), 19 March 1971, which was reprinted in the book, *The Heart of the Poem: Biographical Chapters and Studies of Alterman’s Literary Works* (Tel-Aviv, 1987) 142–53.

5. Uri Zvi Greenberg [1894–1981] was a Hebrew and Yiddish poet committed to ultra-nationalist beliefs.

6. On his relations with Ben-Gurion, see Menachem Dorman (ed), *Between the Poet and the Statesman* (Tel-Aviv, 1972).

7. Nathan Alterman, *Poems of the City of the Dove* (Tel-Aviv, 1957).

8. “Opposite the Mountain,” *Davar*, 9 November 1956; “Rule of Decision,” *Davar*, 8 March 1957.

9. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: Research into Human Nature* (New York, 1958) [English].
10. On this subject, see my articles, "Nathan Alterman during the Lavon Affair," in M. Dorman and A. Komem (eds), *Alterman and His Literary Works* (Beer-Sheva, 1989) 89–130.
11. Compare with Aharon Ben-Ami (ed), *The Whole Lot: Peace Borders in the Land of Israel* (Tel-Aviv, 1967), 11–75.
12. Alterman, *The Three-Way Thread*, 9.
13. Israel Eldad [1910–1996] was an educator, publicist, and a leader in the underground resistance movement, Lehi, during the British Mandate.
14. Rabbi Moshe Zvi Neriah [1913–1995] was an Israeli rabbi, educator, and prolific writer.
15. Oved Ben-Ami [1905–1988] was an activist in the Haganah. He later served as mayor of Natanya and was the owner of the newspaper *Ma'ariv*.
16. Moshe Dayan [1915–1981] served as Defense Minister between 1967–1974.
17. Ezer Weizman [b. 1924] was a Commander of the Israeli Air Force and has been President of Israel since 1993.
18. Yitzhak Tabenkin [1887–1971] was a Labor leader and chief ideologist of HaKibbutz HaMe'uchad Movement.
19. Alterman's notebooks (1967–1970) and his newspaper clippings were made available to me by the late Menachem Dorman. On this subject, see my articles, "Alterman's Notebooks as Source Material for Understanding His Literary and Political Line in the Generation of National Independence," in *The Ninth World Congress of Jewish Sciences*, (Jerusalem, 1986), 379–84.
20. See the following articles, which appear in Alterman, *The Three-Way Thread*: "Increments of Anger" (23 February 1968) 188; "Confusion in the Guise of Realism" (17 November 1967) 130; "The West Bank—*Terra Incognita*" (23 June 1967) 44; "Too Indirect an Approach" (17 May 1968) 249; "Undermining a Fine Idea" (20 October 1967) 12; "Contention Over the Wailing Wall" (25 August 1967) 80.
21. Naor, "The Ideology of Greater Israel," 317–20, 325–31.
22. "Intimidating Prescriptions" (24 November 1967) in Alterman, *The Three-Way Thread*, 134.
23. Benny Marshak [1909–1975] was one of the founders of the Palmach (the Haganah's strike force), and an activist in HaKibbutz HaMe'uchad Movement.
24. Yigal Allon [1918–1980], at that time Labor Minister, was a former military commander, a statesman, and one of the leaders of the Labor Movement.
25. "To the Strict Letter of the Law" (16 August 1968) in Alterman, *The Three-Way Thread*, 288.
26. "Twilight's End—Dawn of Sobriety" (6 October 1968) *ibid.*, 309.
27. "The Third Battle: The Fight for the Jewish People," *ibid.*, 55–9.
28. Shamir, *The Poet as Leader*, 130.
29. Nathan Alterman, *The Last Mask* (Tel-Aviv, 1968).
30. In 1956, forty-three Israeli Arabs from the village of Kfar Kasem, returning

home from working in their fields and unaware of a dawn to dusk curfew, were massacred by Border Police.

31. “Dictum and Absurdity” (15 September 1967) in Alterman, *The Three-Way Thread*, 91–5.

32. “Breaking Out from Twilight,” (24 January 1969), *ibid.*, 388

33. Shimon Peres, *Go with the Men: Seven Portraits* (Jerusalem, 1979) 119.

34. See, for example, the debate with Aharon Megeg in, “The Remonstrators’ Intoxication” (13 October 1967) in Alterman, *The Three-Way Thread*, 107–09, written in reaction to Megeg’s article “On Jewish Survival,” *LaMerchav*, 4 October 1967. Megeg answered Alterman in another article, “An Empty Reproach,” *Ma’ariv*, 20 October 1967, and Alterman then responded in the article “The Heart of the Matter,” (27 October 1967) in Alterman, *The Three-Way Thread*, 117–20. See also his dispute with S. Yizhar in the article “Law of the Game” (15 December 1967), *ibid.*, 147–11. This came on the heels of Yizhar’s article “Poets of Territorial Annexation,” *Ha’Aretz*, 8 December 1967.

35. Dan Miron, “A Document of Israel,” in *Essays on Literature and Society* (Tel-Aviv, 1991) 339–83.

36. Shamir, *The Poet as Leader*, 130.

37. “What Should Be Retained?” (4 August 1967) in Alterman, *The Three-Way Thread*, 64.

38. “The Battle for Peace” (1 November 1968), *ibid.*, 325.

39. Dorman, *The Poet as Politician*, 56–60.

40. “Is It Really a Senseless Argument?” (22 November 1968) in Alterman, *The Three-Way Thread*, 341–5.

41. See especially, “The Ein Harod Convention,” *Davar*, 15 July 1960. Reprinted as “The Kibbutz Hame’uchad Convention at Ein Harod,” in *The Seventh Column*, vol. 2 (Tel-Aviv, 1973) 204–05.

42. “Confusion in the Guise of Realism,” in Alterman, *The Three-Way Thread*, 129.

43. Nazareth Ilite is a newly-created Jewish city juxtaposed alongside an older, established Arab city of Nazareth, yet politically and socially separate from it.

44. “After Denunciation” (27 June 1969) in Alterman, 476.

45. “How to Vote and Not to Vote” (17 October 1969) *ibid.*, 530–5.

46. Members of a late-nineteenth century Jewish nationalist, settlement youth organization, founded in Russia.

47. Aliyah literally means “to ascend.” It is used to describe immigration to Israel, and “the Second and Third Aliyah” refer to waves of large numbers of emigrants during specific periods of the Yishuv.

48. “A New Mind for New Thinking” (12 March 1969), *ibid.*, 418.

49. Pioneering Zionist youth movement with Marxist leanings that sought a synthesis between Zionism and Socialism.

50. A kibbutz in the Upper Galilee, two kilometers from the deserted Arab village of the same name, whose inhabitants were forcibly evacuated during the War of Independence.

51. Peres, *Go with the Men*, 120.
52. Uri Avnery [b. 1923] is an Israeli journalist, writer, and politician.
53. Aryeh Eliav [b. 1921] was Secretary-General of the Labor party, M.K., and Director of Immigration and settlement projects.
54. Jacob Talmon [1916–1980] was a prominent Israeli historian and an advocate of territorial compromise with Palestinian Arabs.
55. “The Empty Prescription” (5 April 1968) in Alterman, *The Three-Way Thread*, 224; “Main Points of the ‘Conflict’” (12 April 1968), *ibid.*, 232.
56. *Molad*, vol. 3 (15–16) (224–225) (June 1970) 131. Reprinted in Aharon Ben-Ami (ed), *The Book of Greater Israel* (Tel-Aviv, 1977) 38.
57. Nathan Alterman, “The New Hobby,” *Ma’ariv*, 27 February 1970.
58. Alterman, *The Three-Way Thread*, 626.
59. Harel Fisch, “Pen in One Hand—Scepter of Morality in the Other,” *Zot Ha’Aretz*, (17 March 1971), 5. Fisch [b. 1923] is an author, critic, and a prominent figure in the Greater Israel Movement.
60. Shamir, *The Poet as Leader*, 10.
61. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Natan der Weise*, 1791 [German].