

Chapter 6

Mobilizing the Nation: The Making of a Conference

Around the time the reparations letter had been dispatched to the Western powers (March 12, 1951), Israel also launched a campaign to mobilize public opinion among the Jewish communities in the West in support of its claim.¹ These publicity efforts yielded substantial results. A long string of mostly American Jewish organizations contacted their respective governments to express unequivocal support for Israel's reparations claim.²

In late May 1951, IMFA officials suggested that world Jewry should once again be mobilized to show their support, and thereby hopefully give the claim yet another push in the right direction.³ The subject was discussed in detail at a meeting dealing with various aspects of the reparations claim held at Foreign Minister Sharett's home on June 19, with the participation of senior IMFA officials and the director-general of the Ministry of Finance, David Horowitz. The latter proposed organizing a conference of the world's prominent Jewish organizations in late fall, with the aim of "demonstrating the support of the entire Jewish world for Israel's demand to receive reparations from Germany." Those present embraced the notion wholeheartedly, with Sharett proclaiming it "an important idea, the possibilities of which must certainly be investigated."⁴

The topic of the conference came up again during a senior IMFA officials' meeting on July 26. Most of the attendees reiterated their favorable opinion on the matter. However, during the weeks that had passed since the idea was first brought up, a small but adamant resistance – made up of Gershon Avner and Gershon Meron – had formed against it. The two argued that the proposed conference would not only fail to provide Israel with the kind of positive publicity it sought, but possibly even prove detrimental to its ambitions. The reparations issue, they explained, is a bone of "rather bitter" contention between Israel and the leading Jewish organizations in the West. How then could Israel hope to "achieve general consensus in [this] demonstrative conference" on the subject of

¹ See Chapter 3.

² USNA, DoS, RG 59, CDF (1950–1954), 262.84A41/7-651, Israeli Reparation Claim, July 6, 1951; USNA, DoS, RG 59, CDF (1950–1954), 262.84A41/5-1851, J. Pool to the Department of State, May 15, 1951; ISA, MFA 2417/2, Our Claim for Reparation from Germany, March 22, 1951; JTA, April 18, 1951.

³ ISA, MFA 344/15, S. Bendor to the Embassy in Washington, May 24, 1951.

⁴ ISA, MFA 2417/2, Meeting summary, Without Date; ISA, MFA 344/15, Shilumim, June 22, 1951.

the reparations claim? Should the conference come to a close without a statement in support of Israel or with one that was perhaps hollow or vague, it would reveal the various disagreements between Israel and the world's Jewry, causing tremendous harm to Israel's chances of winning its claim in the process.⁵ Israel would be better off, in their opinion, setting the whole conference idea aside and preparing, instead, a written declaration in support of its reparations claim. Jerusalem could then take the necessary steps behind the scenes in order to try and convince the Jewish organizations to sign it.⁶

The “contention” mentioned by Meron and Avner had been hanging over Jewish-Israeli relations since the summer of 1950, when the question of reparations first started making its way onto the IMFA agenda. It became more palpable shortly after Jerusalem had submitted its claim to the powers in the spring of 1951. The organizations supported the move in public, of course, but under the surface they raised “difficult questions about the right of Israel to speak for the entire nation” on the matter of reparations and, consequently, about its right to file the claim in the first place.⁷ A particularly obdurate stance on the matter was held by the American Jewish Committee.⁸ When asked for his opinion on the conference idea by Ambassador Eban, the president of the Committee, Jacob Blaustein, responded that he was inclined to view it positively, provided that Israel recognize it was not the sole representative of the Jewish people on the matter of collective reparations (and therefore cannot be the sole claimant of reparations).⁹ The American Jewish Committee's position was of the utmost importance since it was considered one of the leading Jewish organizations in the world and, therefore, wielded substantial influence over the other organizations.¹⁰ Starting in March, their rejection of the idea that Israel alone could speak for the Jewish people as a whole on the subject of reparations led representatives of several Jewish organizations to call, albeit sporadically, for the filing of a second reparations claim, this time by Diaspora Jewry.

Although the problem of representation was the main point of dispute between Israel and the Jewish organizations in the context of reparations, it was not the only one. A second issue had in fact emerged around the same time. Washington had made it clear to senior officials at the JTC and the JRSO that the Israeli

⁵ ISA, MFA 2417/3, G. Avner to E. Herlitz, August 15, 1951.

⁶ ISA, MFA 344/15, S. Bendor to the Embassy in Washington, July 27, 1951.

⁷ ISA, MFA 2417/3, G. Avner to E. Herlitz, August 15, 1951.

⁸ ISA, MFA 2543/7, E. Herlitz to F. Shinnar, November 23, 1951.

⁹ DEPI, Vol. 6, Document 306, A. Eban to the United States Division, August 3, 1951; Shafir, *Ambiguous Relations*, 165.

¹⁰ Zweig, *German Reparations and the Jewish World*, 51.

reparations claim could hurt badly the restitution and indemnification claims. The overall capital West Germany had allotted for the payment of all the various compensation claims, the Americans explained, was limited, and Bonn's acceptance of the Israeli claim would hamper the ability of its treasury to settle claims of the other two kinds.¹¹ The FRG would therefore have no choice but to postpone the transfer of property restitution and indemnification funds until a final settlement was reached in the reparations claim – in other words, until the amount Bonn must give to Jerusalem was decided.¹²

The Jewish organizations in the West were incensed: they were deeply involved in the domain of restitution claims for heirless property, mainly due to their participation in the JTC and the JRSO. On July 11, they arranged for their representatives to meet with Eban and Keren in order to hammer out the issue.¹³ To properly elucidate the scope of the problem, the JRSO had prepared a memo which showed that the total sum of current and future property restitution and indemnification claims might be as high as five billion DM (roughly 1.2 billion USD).¹⁴ This was an enormous figure and Keren warned of the possibility that the three kinds of compensation claims may be “headed for a straight-on and very damaging collision.”¹⁵ Avner hastened to support his colleague’s assertion.¹⁶ Israel, now comprehending the problem, tried to convince the American government that there was “no connection whatsoever” between the Israeli claim and the other two types of claims.¹⁷ Yet, if the Jewish organizations expected Israel to take any drastic steps to amend the situation – retract its reparations claim, postpone it to a later date, minimize the claim amount or declare to the powers that the reparations claim did not take precedence over the other two kinds of claims – their hopes were in vain. At a September 5 meeting of the higher-ups in Jerusalem on the subject of reparations, a meeting attended by Foreign Minister Sharett, Finance Minister Kaplan, and the heads of the Jewish Agency, among others, it was stated unequivocally that “our reparations claim must be viewed as the foremost claim, one that trumps all other claims in scope and importance.”¹⁸

11 ISA, MFA 344/21, S. Rosenne to A. Eban, July 26, 1951.

12 ISA, MFA 1782/6, G. Landauer to G. Meron, June 27, 1951; ISA, MFA 1782/6, E. Livneh to the Economic Division in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 4, 1951.

13 CZA, Z6/529, N. Robinson to N. Goldmann, July 13, 1951.

14 ISA, MFA 2417/3, Memorandum, without Date.

15 ISA, MFA 2417/3, M. Keren to F. Shinnar, August 3, 1951.

16 ISA, MFA 534/1, G. Avner to E. Livneh, September 12, 1951.

17 ISA, MFA 344/15, M. Keren to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 3, 1951.

18 ISA, MFA 2543/6, F. Shinnar to E. Livneh, September 10, 1951; CZA, A376/204, Memorandum, October 14, 1951.

These were, thus, the main two points of contention between Israel and the Jewish organizations on the matter of reparations, and the reasons why it would be impossible to hold a pan-Jewish conference that would be of any publicity value to Israel, according to Avner and Meron. The IMFA was sympathetic to this view, even if they did not fully accept it. Subsequently, at the meeting of the IMFA's top brass on July 26, it was decided that political advisor Leo Cohen would prepare a statement draft expressing support for the Israeli claim to be sent out for the approval of the Jewish organizations prior to the conference. This preliminary maneuver would guarantee that when the conference did take place, "an appropriate statement supporting our claim for reparations" would be "unanimously accepted in a show of absolute unity by the entirety of world Jewry."¹⁹

On August 5, a meeting was held at the IMFA with the participation of Sharett, Eytan, Horowitz, Leo Cohen, Shinnar, and Goldmann, where it was decided to hold the conference on October 17. The task of inviting the organizations was delegated to the Jewish Agency, rather than the government, for "understandable reasons" – the Israeli government would have looked rather ridiculous summoning a Jewish display of support for its own cause.²⁰ The meeting attendees concluded that "the goal of the conference is to create a united Jewish front supporting Israel's claim," and that "the conference has to be directed at the powers – mainly the United States government, as well as the Bonn government."²¹ In other words, the conference was aimed at urging these countries' leaderships to start taking concrete actions toward the establishment of the Israeli-German negotiations channel and ensuring that this route would quickly yield a favorable outcome for Israel.

Cohen set to work writing the text of the statement, completing the task in early September. It was then dispatched to Goldmann by Shinnar, together with the conference plan the latter had drafted. The event was to last "no longer than one and a half to two hours" and by the end of it produce a favorable statement.²² Goldmann was taken aback. He found it hard to fathom how Shinnar could have thought it possible to "arrange a conference as streamlined as you indicate,

¹⁹ ISA, MFA 2417/3, Re: Discussion on the Problem of Shilumim from Germany, August 1, 1951; ISA, MFA 2417/3, Shilumim: Protocol of the Discussion held on July 26, August 5, 1951; ISA, MFA 2417/3, Protocol from August 1, 1951 on the Discussion of the Problem of Shilumim from Germany held on July 26, 1951, August 13, 1951.

²⁰ ISA, MFA 533/5, W. Eytan to Israel's Representatives in a number of Western Capitals, September 14, 1951.

²¹ ISA, MFA 344/15, Abridged Summary from a Meeting on the Subject of *Shilumim*, August 12, 1951.

²² ISA, MFA 2417/3, F. Shinnar to N. Goldmann, September 12, 1951.

which will last two hours, adopt a resolution prepared by you and then the people who came from Australia, South-Africa, etc. will just fly home." Such a procedure, Goldmann asserted, was unacceptable, especially if over fifteen different organizations were to take part in the conference. To his mind, the event had to take place over at least two days. He also doubted the likelihood of getting the organizations to sign off on the statement prepared by Cohen, which expressed absolute and unquestioning support for the Israeli reparations claim. Their representatives, he warned, would insist on discussing the controversial issues, such as who would lead the negotiations with the Germans on the question of reparations and what the attainment of reparations would mean for the fate of the two other categories of compensation.²³

Director-general of the IMFA, Walter Eytan, was also critical of the proposed statement draft. He felt it failed to reflect the full extent of the horror inflicted upon the Jewish people by the Nazi regime. At a meeting he held with IMFA officials involved in the reparations issue, it was decided to ask Cohen to add a paragraph that would elucidate the subject at length.²⁴ Cohen, however, had fallen ill in the meantime, and it was Fischel, Shinnar's assistant, who ended up making the requested adjustment.²⁵ Once Cohen had regained his health, he perused the amended statement and rejected it in its entirety. Some of the Jewish organizations, he clarified to Eytan, had already reached their own agreements with Bonn over various aspects of the compensation question. These organizations might be unwilling to sign any document that used excessively harsh wording against the German people due to its Nazi past. He therefore advised going back to the original text he had prepared.²⁶

Cohen's suggestion was indeed implemented, to a certain extent at least, but not because of his own vociferous objections; rather it was Chancellor Adenauer's declaration on September 27 that swung the pendulum his way. This historic speech provoked doubts among several IMFA officials regarding the necessity of holding a Jewish conference. If the purpose of this public display was, among other things, to bring about the establishment of a channel for Israeli-German talks, the Chancellor's declaration already included a proposal to this effect. Shinnar was among the first to express this view. "We must take into account," he opined, "that the publication of the German declaration [...] is a factor that somewhat diminishes the importance of the conference."²⁷ The financial advisor at the Israel legation in London

²³ ISA, MFA 2417/3, N. Goldmann to F. Shinnar, September 14, 1951.

²⁴ ISA, MFA 533/5, F. Shinnar to L. Cohen, September 16, 1951.

²⁵ ISA, MFA 533/5, W. Fischel to W. Eytan, September 19, 1951.

²⁶ ISA, MFA 533/5, L. Cohen to W. Eytan, September 25, 1951.

²⁷ ISA, MFA 2417/3, F. Shinnar to N. Goldmann, September 26, 1951.

raised a similar point.²⁸ Avner made his position known rather bluntly when he recommended to Shinnar to call off the conference immediately.²⁹ And yet, the policy makers refused to give up the idea. The Chancellor's pronouncement did indeed increase the chances of opening direct Israeli-German negotiations. However, it was far from being a *fait accompli*. Nor did the speech make any guarantees that Israel would obtain its financial recompense through these talks. Nevertheless, it was felt in Jerusalem that the criticism of the German nation over its actions under the Nazi regime needed to be toned down. Bonn was liable to be offended by such a verbal attack and might reconsider its willingness to establish direct talks with Jerusalem. It was therefore decided to take out the majority of the language emphasizing the heavy burden of guilt weighing on the German people from Fischel's draft. In addition to that, it was decided to add a paragraph addressing Adenauer's declaration.³⁰

Shinnar and Fischel set to work and, on October 8, presented a new amended draft.³¹ However, the new version of the statement would not do either. The legal advisor of the IMFA, Shabtai Rosenne, turned the authors' attention to the presence of what he saw as problematic turns of phrase, from the political and legal standpoints.³² A far more scathing criticism of the new draft was expressed by the Jewish organizations. This reaction was fueled, in part, by the Chancellor's speech, which, as Sharett put it, "had whet [their] appetite."³³ As mentioned previously, Adenauer's declaration had increased the likelihood of a direct talks channel opening up between Israel and West Germany, and with it, the probability of reaching some kind of settlement on the matter of reparations. The dispute over representation was thus rendered tangible and pressing. One must also recall that the Chancellor himself had expressed Bonn's interest in resolving the compensation question "jointly with representatives of [World] Jewry." The organizations became more vocal and explicit than ever about their intention to submit

²⁸ ISA, MFA 533/5, The Economic Counselor at the Legation in London to F. Shinnar, September 28, 1951.

²⁹ ISA, MFA 533/5, G. Avner to F. Shinnar, October 5, 1951.

³⁰ ISA, MFA 533/5, G. Avner to F. Shinnar, October 5, 1951.

³¹ ISA, MFA 2543/7, Draft Resolution to be adopted by the Conference of Jewish Organizations to be held in Washington in October 1951, October 8, 1951.

³² ISA, MFA 1809/1, Alterations Suggested in Draft Resolution to be adopted by the Conference of Jewish Organizations to be held in Washington in October 1951, October 19, 1951.

³³ ISA, Meeting of the Cabinet, October 25, 1951, 35. See also: ILPA, 2-932-1950-56A, Meeting of Mapai Members with Moshe Sharett, April 17, 1952.

a second collective reparations claim as soon as Israel commenced its direct and official negotiations on the subject of reparations with the FRG.³⁴

This position was made abundantly clear in a meeting held on October 11 between Sharett and senior officials of the Israeli embassy in Washington, on the one hand, and representatives of the major American Jewish organizations, on the other, at the Jewish Agency's offices in New York City. Sharett did everything in his power to convince his American-Jewish interlocutors of the misguidedness of their stance. "I argued," he told the ministers in their weekly cabinet meeting, "that showing up before the Germans with two monetary claims is, first and foremost, a disgrace, and also not a wise or worthwhile move financially speaking." He recommended that, in the future negotiations with the West Germans, Israel focus on reparations while the Jewish organizations deal with the various legislative issues related to the other two kinds of claims. His words, however, fell on deaf ears.³⁵

The Jewish organizations demanded that the concluding statement of the conference express their view on the reparations issue, which Shinnar and Fischel's latest draft, like all others preceding it, did not. The reparations claim, according to all the versions composed thus far, was an exclusively Israeli territory. Furthermore, they made only passing mention of the other two types of claims. It is therefore not surprising that the organizations protested Israel's proposed statement.

The Israeli-Jewish conflict over the question of reparations was discussed during three addition consultations held in the second half of October. All attempts to reach a compromise proved futile, despite a promise made by the organizations' representatives to their Israeli counterparts that if the FRG should acquiesce to a second reparations claim (that of Diaspora Jewry), most of the compensation amount would be handed over to Israel. Left with no other choice, the two sides decided to continue hashing out the issue during the conference. Nonetheless, in the interest of keeping their disagreements out of the public eye, it was agreed to hold the discussions behind closed doors.³⁶ During these three consultations, the parties did finalize the administrative details: the conference program, the exact place and time it would be held, and the list of participating organizations. The latter consisted of twenty-two major Jewish organizations representing

³⁴ Blaustein, president of the American Jewish Committee, made it clear to Goldmann in mid October that Adenauer's declaration had fundamentally changed the rules of the game and it now required a compensations settlement with West Germany "on the part of the Israeli government and Jews in other parts of the world as well." AJCA, Online, AJC – Minutes of the Administrative Committee, December 12, 1951.

³⁵ ISA, Meeting of the Cabinet, October 25, 1951, 34–39.

³⁶ ISA, MFA 2543/7, E. Herlitz to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 1, 1951.

the Jewish communities in the West.³⁷ Goldmann sent out the invitations to these organizations on behalf of the Jewish Agency.³⁸ No Jewish organizations from Eastern Europe or the USSR took part in the conference due to the respective authorities' refusal to allow their representatives to leave the country in order to attend it.³⁹

The morning of October 25, 1951, saw the inauguration of the Jewish conference at the Waldorf Astoria hotel in New York City. Goldmann, who had been chosen to lead the conference plenum meetings, made the opening remarks, followed by Ambassador Eban, speaking for the Israeli government, and Israel Goldstein, speaking for the World Jewish Congress, each taking their turn to address the assembly. The ensuing meetings included speeches made by representatives of the various organizations as well as experts on the subject of compensation. The following day, October 26, the conference closed with a ceremonial assembly attended by members of the Jewish and foreign press, where the concluding statement of the conference was made public.

The divergences between Israel and the organizations on the matter of reparations were reflected in the speeches. Jacob Blaustein underscored that Israel's claim was not the only one on the table and that it was imperative to promote all other claims on behalf of the Jewish people.⁴⁰ Goldmann presented the reparations category as a "pan-Jewish" issue and avoided mentioning the fact that Israel was claiming sole responsibility over it. Eban, on the other hand, implored his listeners to accept Israel's exclusive custody of the reparations claim and expressed concern over a second claim that would compete with Israel's efforts and most likely hamper them.⁴¹

The contention between the two sides was likewise manifest in the final statement that closed the conference. A decisions committee, composed of one representative from each organization, assembled at the end of the day on October 25 to discuss the statement draft concocted by Shinnar and Fischel "the length of an entire evening." In Israel, the hope was that the organizations would eventually concede and

³⁷ Among the organizations that took part in the conference were: The American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, Board of Deputies of British Jews, Conseil représentatif des institutions juives de France (CRIF), Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas, Canadian Jewish Congress, Executive Council of Australian Jewry, South African Jewish Board of Deputies, World Jewish Congress, The Jewish Agency.

³⁸ Blumenthal, *Right of Reparations*, 53.

³⁹ CZA, Protocol of the Zionist General Council Session in Jerusalem (May 7–15, 1952), 9th Meeting, May 12, 1952, 152.

⁴⁰ Rosensaft, "The Early History," 28.

⁴¹ CAHJP, CC 16600, Minutes Foundation of the Conference on Jewish Claims against Germany, October 25–26, 1951.

accept this draft as it was, with slight corrections at most, but this hope was destined to be dashed. The committee made critical alterations to the Israeli draft. And, as if that were not enough, upon presentation of the altered text to the conference plenum, this larger forum decided to subject it to a few more “minor changes.”⁴²

The concluding statement opened by stating that “this conference was called together for the sole purpose of considering Jewish material claims against Germany.” In other words, Jewish leaders in Israel and the world were clarifying that they had no intention of reconciling with Germany if and when the compensations claims should be settled. In direct accordance with this, the statement went on to specify that the material compensation being claimed from the Germans could in any way make amends for “crimes of the nature and magnitude perpetrated by Nazi Germany against Jews.” These two paragraphs were overtly aimed at neutralizing elements within the Jewish public who opposed any contact with the Germans. Further on, the statement described the Holocaust of European Jewry briefly and in restrained terms, so as to avoid rattling the Bonn government. For the same reason, the statement did not include an appeal to the Western powers to apply pressure to Germany on the issue of compensation, nor the demand that the rehabilitation process be halted until this issue was settled. The resolution did mention the Chancellor’s historic September 27 declaration, highlighting the fact that it had been approved by the Bundestag.⁴³

The statement ended with three resolutions. The first expressed unreserved support for the Israeli reparations claim. The second determined that the conference likewise demanded the satisfaction of all other Jewish compensation claims. These, of course, included property restitution and indemnification claims, but also a claim for the “rehabilitation of the Jewish victims of Nazi persecution,” which referred in fact to the second reparations claim the Jewish organizations were planning to submit. The third resolution consisted of an emphatic reiteration of the importance accorded to the satisfaction of restitution and indemnification claims, as well as an expansion of the legal frameworks to accommodate them.⁴⁴

Hence, the concluding statement faithfully reflected the Jewish organizations’ positions on their two points of contention with Israel: it was made clear that there was room for a second reparations claim, and ample emphasis was placed

⁴² ISA, MFA 2543/7, E. Herlitz to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 1, 1951.

⁴³ An Israeli diplomat who was covering the conference wrote that the mention of the Bundestag was meant to “hold any [West German] government that might come after Adenauer” to the contents of the declaration. ISA, MFA 2543/7, E. Herlitz to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 1, 1951.

⁴⁴ AIG, Document 15, Resolutions of the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany on the Subject of Material Claims from Germany, New York, 26 October, 1951.

on the importance of the other two types of compensation claims. Israel had no choice but to swallow the bitter pill. The organizations were, for the time being, unbending in their position, and any attempt to impose a different stance upon them could have resulted in a resounding collapse of the conference. Were this to occur, the damage inflicted to the public image of Israel and its reparations claim in the international arena would have been unimaginable.

Emotions at the IMFA were understandably mixed. On the one hand, they were extremely content to have the world's prominent Jewish organizations give the State of Israel "full support of our claim." On the other hand, apprehensions of their plans to launch a second reparations claim were growing.⁴⁵

And rightly so. The Jewish organizations came away from the New York conference with one fundamental intention: to institutionalize their relations by establishing a pan-Jewish organization to handle all property restitution and indemnifications claims, as well as the second reparations claim.⁴⁶ The vision of the pan-Jewish organization became reality as soon as the conference had come to an end, with the establishment of "The Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany," or the "Claims Conference" for short.⁴⁷ This body initially consisted of two committees: a Policy Committee, whose membership consisted of representatives of all the organizations who had taken part in the New York conference, and an Executive Committee where only the most prominent of the organizations at the conference were represented. Nahum Goldmann was elected chairman of the Claims Conference.⁴⁸ The important role the Claims Conference was destined to play in the German compensation saga would come to light over the following months, and with it, the challenge that it would pose to Israel's ambition of obtaining reparations.

⁴⁵ ISA, MFA 2543/7, E. Herlitz to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 1, 1951.

⁴⁶ The idea of establishing wide-reaching cooperation on the matter of material compensation had been in the air for almost six months. The Jewish Agency had already initiated a conference in Paris in May 1951, with the participation of the major Jewish organizations in the West, with the aim of consolidating inter-organizational relationships with regard to the various compensation claims. CZA, A376/204, Follow-up Proceedings on the Complex of Jewish Property Restitution in Germany, March 28, 1951; ISA, MFA 534/1, AJDC-JAFP-Successor Organizations Conference on Restitution and Related Matters held on May 8 and 9, 1951 at Paris, June 12, 1951; AJJDC, AR NY 45/54 File 374, Summary of Meeting on Specific Transfer Questions, May 10, 1951; AJJDC, AR NY 45/54 File 1397, Coordination of Restitution and Related Problems among Interested Jewish Organizations in Various Countries, August 25, 1951.

⁴⁷ The name of the organization was intended to emphasize its focus on material compensation claims alone, rather than the horrific crime that was the murder of six million Jews – an act for which there could be no recompense. Yaakov, "Fifty Years," 22.

⁴⁸ ISA, MFA 2543/7, E. Herlitz to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 1, 1951.