The question that this book aims to answer seems simple: how can a violent project of colonial dispossession and racial discrimination be repackaged—via a system of emotional investments, curated perceptions, and carefully staged pedagogical exercises—into something that can be imagined, felt, and profoundly believed in as though it were the exact opposite: the embodiment of ecological regeneration, multicultural tolerance, and democratic idealism? Israel was founded through a process of ethnic cleansing and the subsequent colonization of forcibly occupied land. It maintains and enforces not only a decades-old military occupation but also a stark system of ethnic and racial distinction and separation across all the territory it has seized since 1948. (I should note from the outset that throughout this book I use the terms “race,” “racial group,” “racism,” and the like as they are understood in international law, notably the landmark 1965 International Convention for the Elimination of All forms of Racial Discrimination [ICERD], which explicitly encompasses any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on national or ethnic origin, as well as color or descent, as a form of racial discrimination.) It has a system of government characterized by what the instruments of international law specifically identify as apartheid. It systematically
demolishes homes belonging to one racial group—Palestinian Arabs, whether they are citizens of the state or not—while equally systematically building homes for another racial group—Israeli Jews—in the service of a stark logic of racial exclusion. Similarly, it selectively restricts health care, access to education, access to water, freedom of movement, and other basic rights—including even access to sufficient nutrition—to one racial group while granting extraordinary privileges to the other. Even as I write this introduction in the spring of 2021, Israel is undertaking a massive COVID-19 vaccination program that has seen its citizens and Jewish settlers in the occupied territories inoculated against a deadly virus, while scrupulously going out of its way to avoid vaccinating the 4 million Palestinians living under its military occupation, for whose welfare it is accountable under international law.

Biomedical apartheid gets no more blatant than that. And yet, far from being condemned for this bleak racialization of medicine, Israel's COVID vaccination program has been celebrated around the world as an example of the state's pioneering spirit in science and technology, its determination to protect its population from all threats, its ability to mobilize public resources for the common good. This cascade of praise fits into a larger pattern. For decades, Israel has been embraced by the most liberal sectors of European and especially American society as the very embodiment of the progressive values of tolerance, plurality, inclusivity, and democracy—and, hence, as a project that can be passionately defended for its lofty ideals despite well-documented evidence to the contrary.

Essential to this miraculous act of political alchemy is a specific form of denial in which the Palestinian presence in and claim to Palestine (as well as Zionism's role in violently attempting to negate that claim) are not simply refused, covered up, or negated outright. Rather, they are occluded in such a way that that act of denial is itself denied by being expressed not in negative terms but through the positive affirmation of various wonderful virtues. Thus, for example, although very few people—and even fewer self-avowed liberals or leftists—would knowingly support and invest emotionally in a state that flaunts its methodical demolition of entire villages after their inhabitants had been driven in terror from their homes, many would happily support a state that plants trees, greens an apparently barren landscape, and loudly claims to make the desert bloom. What, then, if the
removal of houses is both materially and figuratively covered up by—in fact, transacted through the process of—planting trees over their ruins in order to occlude the constitutive act of violence? A state that engages in—that announces itself as—a project of greening the landscape, making the desert bloom, inventing clever new forms of irrigation and so forth would (and has, and does still) attract all the necessary ethical, emotional, financial, and political support that it needs from liberal supporters around the world who would never for a moment contemplate endorsing a project of ethnic cleansing and home demolition as such. As the following chapters show, the emphasis of the positive value not only makes it possible to overlook the dark history occluded by the act of joyous affirmation, but also makes the dark history possible in the first place; it nourishes and sustains it over the years.

There is, of course, a strand of Zionism that does not traffic in such forms of denial. It can be seen in, for instance, Yisrael Beiteinu (“Israel Is Our Home”), the tellingly named political party of Israel’s former defense minister Avigdor Lieberman. Without beating around the bush, Lieberman—a former nightclub bouncer from Moldova—has bluntly called for the removal of the remaining Palestinians from within Israel and the completion of what the Israeli historian Benny Morris calls the “transfer” (i.e., the expulsion) of Palestinians from their land and homes that began, but did not end, in 1948. “They have no place here,” Lieberman said of the country’s indigenous Palestinians who are citizens of the Israeli state; “they can take their bundles and get lost.” Lieberman’s Zionism is unsophisticated and brutal: there is a problem that must be dealt with: the persistence of the Palestinians on their ancestral homeland, land that Zionists claim for an exclusively Jewish state. The only question is what is the best method for dealing with the problem. For Lieberman, expulsion is the obvious answer.

Here is how Benny Morris himself works through this conundrum, albeit at an earlier historical moment than the one addressed by Lieberman today: faced with the overwhelming Palestinian presence in Palestine in the early twentieth century, the Zionist movement, Morris says, could have pursued four paths toward the establishment of a Jewish state in a country that started the twentieth century with a population that was 93 percent non-Jewish. The first option, Morris says, was further Jewish
immigration; but this would not have worked because the indigenous Palestinians would have gone on outnumbering the immigrant European Jews. A second option was apartheid—a Jewish minority lording it over a Palestinian majority; but this would have been bad for public relations with the West. A third option was partition; but there was no way to partition Palestine without leaving too many Palestinians behind in the territory of the putative Jewish state. “The last, and let me say obvious and most logical solution to the Zionists’ demographic problem lay the way of transfer,” Morris concludes, using the euphemism that Zionists have used since the 1920s to signify the forcible expulsion of the Palestinians from their homeland. “You could create a homogeneous Jewish state, or at least a state with an overwhelming Jewish majority, by moving or transferring all or most of the Arabs out of its prospective territory. And this is in fact what happened in 1948.”

Morris is perfectly right, of course: a Jewish state could never have been created in Palestine without mass forcible expulsions, massacres, home demolitions, and so on. Which is why, as far as he is concerned, “there are circumstances in history that justify ethnic cleansing.” Fine: we can agree, we can disagree—but at least we know, in arguing with Benny Morris, that we are talking about an event that we all know to have taken place; the only question is whether what happened was right or wrong, justified or not. And, as I noted, a considerable strand of Zionist thought approaches the question of Palestine and the fate of the Palestinians from a similar standpoint. The early Zionist pioneer Vladimir Jabotinsky (the forefather of the Likud party) set the tone for this approach in his uncompromising 1923 essay “The Iron Wall,” and the tradition continues to this day with people like Morris or the University of Haifa demographer Arnon Sofer, who argues, like Morris, that “a state with an overwhelming majority of Jews,” which he supports, fundamentally requires the deployment of endless violence. Therefore, Sofer concludes, “we will have to kill and kill and kill. All day, every day.” The “only thing that concerns me,” he adds, “is how to ensure that the boys and men who are going to have to do the killing will be able to return home to their families and be normal human beings.” But in the end the point of all this is not just killing for the sake of killing. “Unilateral separation doesn’t guarantee ‘peace,’” Sofer says; “it guarantees a Zionist-Jewish state with an overwhelming majority of
Jews.” Again, we can argue about whether this is right or wrong at a moral level, justified or not—but at least, in arguing with Sofer, as with Morris or Lieberman, we are all in agreement that this kind of violence is necessary if you support the creation and maintenance of an exclusively Jewish state in what has historically been (and still is) a culturally and religiously heterogeneous land; the only question is whether one supports or opposes the existence of such a state given these circumstances. Morris, Lieberman, and Sofer all do, and they explain why they do in perfectly rational terms: if mass killing and ethnic cleansing are what is required, then so be it. At least they are honest about it.

But it is difficult for most people to be quite so blunt, quite so strident, quite so uncompromisingly honest in their support for violence, mass murder, and ethnic cleansing essential to Israel’s control over the Palestinians, as expressed so bleakly by Arnon Sofer. Most people who support Zionism and Israel—especially in the United States and Europe—are, I assume, decent people motivated by the best intentions and by what they believe to be a just cause. The tragedies of Jewish history and the immense loss of the Holocaust loom large in their minds. I have no doubt that the majority of them would be incapable of voicing—let alone actually consciously supporting—the monstrosities that a Sofer or a Morris has no hesitation in expressing. But, in order for it to be possible at all, their position is founded on the form of denial and repression that this book investigates. I am interested here in a form of denial very different from the one brilliantly elaborated by Stanley Cohen in *States of Denial*: not merely ignorance (readily facilitated in any case by the mainstream media in the United States and Europe); not merely the denial of Palestinian history, Palestinian dispossession, and Palestinian rights; but the denial that they have been denied in the first place, and the concomitant affirmation of a whole range of other values—including but limited to the values projected by the hilltop complex centered on Yad Vashem—that are designed to occlude not merely the Palestinian presence but the fact that it has already been occluded.

In discovering this politico-emotional formation, in fact, we have arrived at a Zionism of a kind different from the one represented by Lieberman. This is the form of contemporary Zionism (still the dominant one in the United States and Europe) founded on the repression or denial
of knowledge of the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948. This is the Zionism that, in its more liberal formulations (that of Amos Oz, say), is even happy to talk about Israel relinquishing the territories occupied in 1967, as long as the Nakba, the fate of the refugees of 1948, and the status of Israel’s second-class Palestinian citizens—that is, the constitutive racism of Israel as a state (which chapter 2 examines in detail)—are not brought into the discussion; as long as the “good Israel” of 1948 can be redeemed from the “bad Israel” of 1967.

The chapters that follow explore the mechanisms of affirmation and denial—affirmation as denial—that are essential to such a position. I explore a range of venues, from the haunted landscapes of the thickly planted forests covering over the ruins of hundreds of Palestinian villages forcibly depopulated in 1948 and subsequently reduced to rubble, to the theater of “pinkwashing,” in which Israel presents itself to the world as a gay-friendly haven of cultural inclusion despite its long-standing repression of cultural minorities, its hardwired constitutional commitment to violently homophobic religious structures, and its increasingly explicit forms of racism. The centerpiece of the book is a reading of the site of the so-called Museum of Tolerance presently being built on top of the ruins of a Muslim cemetery in Jerusalem: a site that was methodically desecrated in order to clear space for the construction of a monument supposedly devoted—without a trace of irony—to “tolerance.”

From a Palestinian perspective, it is all too tempting to see such efforts and projects as merely hypocritical: Israel loudly proclaims its commitment to afforestation, for example, but it meanwhile uproots and destroys hundreds of thousands of olive trees planted by Palestinian farmers and tended over the generations. (Israeli troops or settlers have uprooted an estimated 2.5 million trees just in the parts of Palestine occupied since 1967, a third of them olive trees, not to mention the obliteration of olive orchards and citrus groves in the territories occupied since 1948.) What is at stake, however, is far more than hypocrisy. Hypocrisy, like lying, necessarily involves a kind of self-knowledge: I say this, but I knowingly do that. That is not what is happening here. The this and the that—the affirmation and the denial—are simultaneously necessary to each other and split from each other in Zionist discourse and practice. Thus, someone who passionately emphasizes one side of the coin (the affirmative, positive
value) can be totally oblivious to the presence and even the existence of the other side (the act of denial). And yet the act of denial simply could not take place without the affirmation of the positive value.

This is an act of denial so complete, so comprehensive, that it cannot recognize itself as an act of denial in the first place: it erases its own traces in the very process of being transacted. That is why it is not merely hypocrisy but something more interesting, more troubling, more problematic—and infinitely more difficult to challenge. The hypocrite, called out for her hypocrisy, might well blush in shame. Someone engaging in this form of denial, however, will go to his grave denying that he ever denied, because of the specific structure of the form of denial he practices, which allows him not merely to see but to focus obsessively on the value he is upholding while remaining blissfully ignorant of the presence, the people, the history he is helping to stamp out and obliterate—not, in this specific form of Zionism, by invoking a hardened discourse of colonial superiority or rigid racial separation (to which other forms of Zionism resort), but, on the contrary, through the very affirmation of classic liberal values.

This split between affirmation and denial stems in part from the rhetorical structure of Zionism itself, going back to its origins in late-nineteenth-century Europe. Edward Said pointed out more than four decades ago that there was from the beginning a structural bifurcation in the Zionist program. Zionism, Said argues, is a system simultaneously of accumulation (of power, land, and above all legitimacy) and of displacement (of other people, other ideas, other and prior forms of legitimacy). While acquiring for itself a long unchallenged hegemony in the most liberal sectors of US and European society, “Zionism has hidden, or caused to disappear, the literal historical ground of its growth, its political cost to the native inhabitants of Palestine, and its militantly oppressive discrimination between Jews and non-Jews.” Zionism’s ability to conceal its own ongoing history allows people who might vehemently oppose US or South African racism, for instance, to nevertheless support Zionist racial discrimination against non-Jews in Palestine without fully recognizing that that is what they are doing. In the United States, this has produced the remarkable phenomenon of PEP people: those who are Progressive Except Palestine—the environmentally conscious vegan, for example, who can reconcile in herself outraged opposition to racial or gender discrimination
and social and ecological violence in the United States, on the one hand, with passionate support for Israel, on the other. In the United Kingdom, the concealment produces phenomena like the contemporary Labour party, which leans left on most issues with the singular and glaring exception of the question of Palestine. “I support Zionism without qualification,” declared Kier Starmer, the current leader of the party, during a leadership campaign in which the question of Zionism featured prominently. I have personal friends on the left who in their younger days spent time on a kibbutz in Israel because that was the kind of thing young leftists did at a certain moment in Euro-American cultural history.

As Said noted long ago, such a contradiction is made possible by the bifurcation in Zionism. The Zionist program always had two sides: what it meant for Jews (as well as for non-Jewish Europeans and Americans anxious to atone for the violent history of Western anti-semitism up to and including the Holocaust), and what it meant for Palestinians. “One was a careful determination to implement Jewish self-betterment,” Said points out. “About this, of course, the world heard a great deal. Great steps were taken in providing Jews with a new sense of identity, in defending and giving them rights as citizens, in reviving a national ‘home’ language. Yet,” he continues, “the other, dialectically opposite component in Zionism, existing as its inferior where it was never seen (even though directly experienced by Palestinians), was an equally firm and intelligent boundary between benefits for Jews and none (later, punishment) for non-Jews in Palestine.” In Said’s account, this bifurcation enabled a certain kind of blindness. The tragic history of the Jewish people in Europe—and, for that matter, the resurgence of certain forms of anti-semitism in the contemporary world—enable an emotional as much as a political investment in the Zionist project, which becomes a source of pride for what it has meant for Jews, the revival of Hebrew, and Israel’s many achievements in science, technology, medicine, and so on. Said’s point is that one can be completely on board with this side of Zionism without ever taking into account, or even being aware of, Zionism from the standpoint of its victims, to use his memorable phrase.

Said pushes this bifurcation in Zionism perhaps a bit too far, however. Although he refers to it as a dialectic, he is not really developing a dialectical argument. The two sides of his coin function separately from each
other rather than depending on each other: there is Zionism for Jews over here, and Zionism for Palestinians over there. My argument is that these two aspects of Zionism are actively bound up with and need each other. At least through the first part of its existence and until the 2000s, the Zionist project in Palestine fundamentally depended on the support and sustenance of the most (otherwise) progressive and liberal sectors of US and European society, including Jewish communities that have historically been associated with progressive and liberal causes and that have, for example, deep affinities with the civil rights struggle in the United States. Indeed, even some of the most prominent Black intellectual giants—including W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, and James Baldwin—at one time or another expressed their sympathy for the Zionist cause (Malcolm X was a notable exception). In the United States, in fact, support for Israel has historically been more of a Democratic than a Republican issue. Only in recent years have Republicans joined in enthusiastically, driven by a resurgence of right-wing populism, racism, and so-called Christian Zionism in the GOP heartland—very different values than those that drew liberals to the Zionist cause as dressed up by people like Amos Oz in the dreamy heyday of the 1960s and 1970s. A similar dynamic obtains in Britain with Labour support for Zionism (and indeed the recent party purge of Labour figures critical of Israeli policy, including Jeremy Corbyn, Ken Livingstone, and Ken Loach, only reinforces this alignment). In France, many of the leading intellectuals of the left, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida (not to mention the contemporary self-styled philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy) were or have been sympathetic to Israel; Gilles Deleuze and Jean Genet were notable exceptions. There is simply no way that Zionism could have attracted and maintained the support of these left-leaning sectors of society without the forms of denial that this book aims to explore. And, in turn, there is no way that the Zionist project in Palestine could have sustained the level of damage it has inflicted on Palestinians—everything from ethnic cleansing to home demolition, torture, land expropriation, and outright bombardment—without European and American support in general, and the support of progressives and liberals in particular.

Yet it is very difficult, in a liberal Western society, and as a liberal Western subject, to knowingly—self-knowingly above all—endorse a contemporary
project of ethnic cleansing. It is difficult in particular to construct an ethical sense of self, to sustain a sense of liberal identity, while simultaneously endorsing a project of ethnic cleansing. It is difficult to reconcile your strong commitment to democracy and civil rights with your support for a state that practices apartheid and negates civil rights, not to mention other political rights and even fundamental human rights. It is difficult to balance your vigilant support for the separation of church and state (especially if you benefit from such a separation in your own country) with your support for a state in which government and religion are as institutionally inseparable as they are in Iran or Saudi Arabia: states that you despise precisely because of their repressive conflation of religion and politics. It is difficult to coordinate your endorsement of civil marriage or married women’s rights with your support for a state that has no institution of civil marriage and that officially empowers only the Orthodox rabbinate to transact matters of personal status for Jews, policies that severely restrict the rights of married women and in certain respects (such as divorce) binds them to the will of their husbands—even if there are unofficial workarounds for these matters. It is difficult to square your support for principles of inclusivity and tolerance with your support for a state founded on the premise of exclusion and intolerance.

But ignoring, looking aside, refusing to recognize: these are difficult to sustain on their own, and provide no basis for the construction of a liberal and ethical sense of self. What is needed in addition is a set of values to affirm in a positive sense. Or, better yet, a set of values to affirm, the very affirmation of which transacts denial, in such a way that the act of denial is doubly or even triply invisible: first because you deny it; second because your act of denial is so sweeping and comprehensive that it is itself denied (I call this the denial of denial, a notion to which I return in the chapters to follow); and finally because the act of affirming some other value is so hyperbolic, so loudly exaggerated, so theatrically overstated and overperformed that it completely occludes the act of denial that it simultaneously expresses.

Occlusion is a key notion here, and even the dictionary definition helps us think through what is at stake in the political sense of the word. Most simply, to occlude is to obstruct or close, to cover or hide; but, beyond those verbs, to occlude also encourages us to think of the ways in which
something might be carefully placed in the way of something else, “to exclude or render obscure, as if by a blockage; to overshadow,” as the Oxford English Dictionary explains the term. Under the right circumstances, that which occludes can attract so much attention to itself that its performance of occlusion—let alone that which is occluded—is rendered invisible: the act of occlusion is itself occluded.

In this case, I am especially interested in acts of affirmation that occlude acts of denial. More specifically, I’m interested in acts of affirmation that, in the very process of being affirmed, also occlude an act of denial in which they participate, knowingly or otherwise. In this case the act of occlusion is so effective that it erases the very trace of denial even as it transacts it. “To occlude is an act that hides and conceals, creates blockage, and closes off,” Ann Stoler argues; “that which occludes and that which is occluded have different sources, sites of intractability, forms of appearance, and temporal effects. They derive from geopolitical locations as much as they do from conceptual grammars that render different objects observable.”

From a certain carefully managed geopolitical point of view, only that which occludes is there to be seen; that which is occluded disappears, together—and this is hugely significant—with the ability to recognize the act of occlusion itself as an act or a process: although it is carefully staged and even engineered, it is reified, naturalized, faded into the background, rendered permanent, unremarkable, and hence taken for granted as having always already been in place.

In this book I am interested in four particular moments of affirmation-denial—affirmation as denial—which I believe are fundamental to understanding not only the history and nature of Zionism’s conflict with the Palestinians, but also the extent to which this conflict has endured because of the ways it has been nourished and sustained by the support of outside implicated subjects (to use Michael Rothberg’s insightful term). Indeed, the ongoing support of these implicated subjects is absolutely predicated on the maintenance of these (and other) acts of occlusion and denial, without which their support would be untenable for the reasons to which I have alluded.

The first chapter of this book explores the transformation of the landscape of Palestine in the aftermath of the ethnic cleansing of 1948. After the Zionist militias that would eventually coalesce into the Israeli army