

Israel: A Nation Reborn



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“The coming into being of a Jewish state in Palestine is an event in world history to be viewed in the perspective, not of a generation or a century, but in the perspective of a thousand, two thousand, or even three thousand years.”

Winston Churchill

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Let me put my cards on the table. I'm not dispassionate when it comes to Israel. Quite the contrary.

The establishment of the state in 1948; the fulfillment of its envisioned role as home and haven for Jews from around the world; its wholehearted embrace of democracy and the rule of law; and its impressive scientific, cultural, and economic achievements are accomplishments beyond my wildest imagination.

For centuries, Jews around the world prayed for a return to Zion. We are the lucky ones who have seen those prayers answered. I am grateful to witness this most extraordinary period in Jewish history and Jewish sovereignty – in the words of *Hatikvah*, Israel's national anthem, “to be a free people in our land, the land of Zion and Jerusalem.”

And when one adds the key element, namely, that all this took place not in the Middle West but in the Middle East, where Israel's neighbors determined from day one to destroy it through any means available to them — from full-scale wars to wars of attrition; from diplomatic isolation to international delegitimization; from primary to secondary to even tertiary economic boycotts; from terrorism to the spread of antisemitism, often thinly veiled as anti-Zionism or BDS campaigns — the story of Israel becomes all the more remarkable.

No other country has even remotely faced such a constant challenge to its very right to exist, even though the age-old biblical, spiritual, and physical connection between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel is surely unique in the annals of history.

Indeed, that connection is of a completely different character from the basis on which, say, the United States, Australia, Canada,

New Zealand, or the bulk of Latin American countries were established, that is, by Europeans with no legitimate claim to those lands who subjugated and decimated indigenous populations and proclaimed their own authority. Or, for that matter, North African countries that were conquered and occupied by Arab-Islamic invaders who, without hesitation, redefined their national character. Or nations like Iraq and Jordan, which were created by then-imperialist Western powers for entirely self-serving reasons.

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No other country has faced such overwhelming odds against its very survival, or experienced the same degree of never-ending campaign of demonization and vilification by too many nations ready to throw integrity and morality to the wind, and slavishly follow the will of the energy-rich and more numerous Arab states.

Yet Israelis have never succumbed to a fortress mentality, never abandoned their deep yearning for peace with their neighbors or willingness to take unprecedented risks to achieve that peace — as was the case with Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994, for example, in the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, and one day, no doubt, in a deal with the Palestinians, when their leadership finally accepts Israel’s reality — never lost their zest for life, and never flinched from their determination to build a vibrant, democratic state.

This story of nation-building is entirely without precedent.

Here was a people brought to the brink of utter destruction by the genocidal policies of Nazi Germany and its allies. Here was a people shown to be utterly powerless to influence a largely indifferent world to stop, or even slow

down, the Final Solution. And here was a people, numbering barely 600,000, living cheek-by-jowl with often hostile Arab neighbors, under unsympathetic British occupation, on a harsh soil with no significant natural resources other than human capital in what was then Mandatory Palestine.

That the blue-and-white flag of an independent Israel could be planted on this land, to which the Jewish people had been intimately linked since the time of Abraham, just three years after the end of the Holocaust — and with the support of a decisive majority of UN members at the time (33 in favor, 13 opposed, with ten abstentions) — truly boggles the mind.

And what's more, that this tiny community of Jews, including survivors of the Holocaust who had somehow made their way to Mandatory Palestine despite the British blockade and British detention camps in Cyprus, could successfully defend themselves against the onslaught of five Arab standing armies, is almost beyond comprehension.

To understand the essence of Israel's meaning, it is enough to ask how the history of the Jewish people might have been different had there been a Jewish state in 1933, in 1938, or even in 1941. If Israel had controlled its borders and the right of entry instead of Britain, if Israel had had embassies and consulates throughout Europe, how many more Jews might have escaped and found sanctuary?

Instead, Jews had to rely on the goodwill of embassies and consulates of other countries and, with woefully few exceptions, they found there neither the "good" nor the "will" to assist.

I witnessed firsthand what Israeli embassies and consulates meant to Jews drawn by the pull of Zion or the push of hatred. I stood in the courtyard of the Israeli embassy in Moscow and saw thousands of Jews seeking a quick exit from a Soviet Union in the throes of cataclysmic

change, fearful that the change might be in the direction of renewed chauvinism and antisemitism.

Awestruck, I watched up-close as Israel never faltered, not even for a moment, in transporting Soviet Jews to the Jewish homeland, even as Scud missiles launched from Iraq traumatized the nation in 1991. It says a lot about the conditions they were leaving behind that these Jews continued to board planes for Tel Aviv while missiles were exploding in Israeli population centers. In fact, on two occasions I sat in sealed rooms with Soviet Jewish families who had just arrived in Israel during these missile attacks. Not once did any of them question their decision to establish new lives in the Jewish state. And equally, it says a lot about Israel that, amid all the pressing security concerns, it managed to continue welcoming these new immigrants without missing a beat.

I traveled to the Gondar region of Ethiopia in the 1980s and met Jews who had waited centuries, perhaps millennia, to return to Zion, never losing their faith or hope. And return they did in extraordinary operations organized by Israel. As one African-American leader said then: “This was the first time that Africans were taken from the continent not in chains for slavery, but on planes for freedom.”

And how can I ever forget the surge of pride — Jewish pride — that completely enveloped me 40 years ago, in July 1976, on hearing the astonishing news of Israel’s daring rescue of the 106 Jewish hostages held by Arab and German terrorists in Entebbe, Uganda, over 2,000 miles from Israel’s borders? The unmistakable message: Jews in danger will never again be alone, without hope, and totally dependent on others for their safety.

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Not least, I can still remember, as if it were yesterday, my very first visit to Israel. It was in 1970, and I was not quite 21 years old.

I didn't know what to expect, but I recall being quite emotional from the moment I boarded the El Al plane to the very first glimpse of the Israeli coastline from the plane's window. As I disembarked, I surprised myself by wanting to kiss the ground. In the ensuing weeks, I marveled at everything I saw. To me, it was as if every apartment building, factory, school, orange grove, and Egged bus was nothing less than a miracle. A state, a Jewish state, was unfolding before my very eyes.

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I was overwhelmed by the mix of people, backgrounds, languages, and lifestyles, and by the intensity of life itself. Everyone, it seemed, had a compelling story to tell. There were Holocaust survivors with harrowing tales of their years in the camps. There were Jews from Arab countries, whose stories of persecution in such countries as Iraq, Libya, and Syria were little known at the time. There were the first Jews arriving from the USSR seeking repatriation in the Jewish homeland. There were the sabras — native-born Israelis — many of whose families had lived in Palestine for generations. There were local Arabs, both

Christian and Muslim. There were Druze, whose religious practices are kept secret from the outside world. The list goes on and on.

I was moved beyond words by the sight of Jerusalem and the fervor with which Jews of all backgrounds prayed at the Western Wall. Coming from a nation that was at the time deeply divided and demoralized, I found my Israeli peers to be unabashedly proud of their country, eager to serve in the military, and, in many cases, determined to volunteer for the most elite combat units. They felt personally involved in the enterprise of building a Jewish state, more than 1,800 years after the Romans quashed the Bar Kochba revolt, the last Jewish attempt at sovereignty on this very land.

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To be sure, nation-building is an infinitely complex process. In Israel’s case, it began against a backdrop of tensions with a local Arab population that laid claim to the very same land, and tragically refused a UN proposal to divide the land into Arab and Jewish states; as the Arab world sought to isolate, demoralize, and ultimately destroy the state; as Israel’s population doubled in the first three years of the country’s existence, putting an unimaginable strain on severely limited resources; as the nation was forced to devote a vast portion of its limited national budget to defense expenditures; and as the country coped with forging a national identity and social consensus among a population that could not have been more geographically, linguistically, socially, and culturally heterogeneous.

Moreover, there is the tricky and underappreciated issue of the potential clash between the messy realities of statehood

and, in this case, the ideals and faith of a people. It is one thing for a people to live their religion as a minority; it is quite another to exercise sovereignty as the majority population while trying to adhere to one's ethical standards. Inevitably, tension will arise between a people's spiritual or moral self-definition and the exigencies of statecraft, between the highest concepts of human nature and the daily realities of individuals in decision-making positions wielding power and balancing a variety of competing interests.

Even so, shall we raise the bar so high as to ensure that Israel — forced to function in the often gritty, morally ambiguous world of international relations and politics, especially as a small, still endangered state — will always fall short?

Yet, the notion that Israel would ever become ethically indistinguishable from any other country, reflexively seeking cover behind the convenient justification of realpolitik to explain its behavior, is equally unacceptable.

Israelis are among the newer practitioners of statecraft. With all its remarkable success, consider the daunting political, social, and economic challenges in the United States 50 or even 150 years after independence, or, for that matter, the challenges it faces today, including stubborn social and economic inequalities and stark, indeed widening, political divisions. And let's not forget that the United States, unlike Israel, is a vast country blessed with abundant natural resources, oceans on two-and-a-half sides, a gentle neighbor to the north, and a weaker neighbor to the south.

Like any vibrant democracy, America is a permanent work in progress. The same holds true for Israel. Admiring Israel as I do, though, doesn't mean overlooking its shortcomings, including the excessive and unholy intrusion of religion into politics, the inexcusable marginalization of non-Orthodox Jewish religious streams, the dangers posed by political and religious zealots, and the unfinished, if undeniably complex, task of integrating Israeli Arabs into the mainstream.

But it also doesn't mean allowing such issues to overshadow Israel's remarkable achievements, accomplished, as I've said, under the most difficult of circumstances.

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In a remarkably short period, Israel has established a thriving democracy, unique in the region, including a Supreme Court prepared, when it deems appropriate, to overrule the prime minister or the military establishment (and even jail ex-presidents and prime ministers who have violated the law), a feisty parliament that includes every imaginable viewpoint along the political and social spectrums, a robust civil society, and a vigorous press.

It has built an enviable economy increasingly based on mind-blowing innovation and cutting-edge technology, whose per capita GNP far exceeds the combined total of its four contiguous sovereign neighbors — Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. It has joined the OECD, become a global hub of research and development, attempted to land a spacecraft on the moon, sent satellites into orbit around the earth, and is a magnet for foreign direct investment.

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It has created one of the world's most powerful militaries — always under civilian control, I might add — to ensure its survival in a rough-and-tumble neighborhood. It has shown the world how a tiny nation, no larger than New Jersey or Wales,

can, by sheer ingenuity, will, courage, and commitment, defend itself against those who would destroy it through conventional armies or armies of suicide bombers. And it has done all this while striving to adhere to a strict code of military conduct that has few rivals in the democratic world, much less elsewhere — and confronted by an enemy prepared to send children to the front lines and seek cover in mosques, schools, and hospitals. Apropos, faced with the spread of terrorism, many countries are seeking to learn from Israel's response strategies and national resilience models.

It has achieved a quality of life that ranks it among the world's healthiest nations and with a particularly high life expectancy, indeed higher than that of the U.S., not to mention a consistently high ranking in the annual "happiness index" for countries.

It has forged a thriving culture, whose musicians, writers, artists, and, most recently, television fare, are admired far beyond Israel's borders. In doing so, it has lovingly taken an ancient language, Hebrew, the language of the prophets, and rendered it modern to accommodate the vocabulary of the contemporary world.

Notwithstanding a few extremist voices of intolerance that deserve unalloyed condemnation, it has built a climate of respect for other faith groups, including Baha'i, Christianity, and Islam, and their places of worship. Can any other nation in the area even begin to make the same claim?

It has built an agricultural sector that has had much to teach developing nations about turning an arid soil into fields of fruits, vegetables, cotton, and flowers.

Step back from the twists and turns of the daily information overload coming from the Middle East and consider the sweep of history since 1948. Look at the light-years traveled since the darkness of the Holocaust, and marvel at the miracle of a decimated people returning to a tiny sliver of land — the

land of our ancestors, the land of Zion and Jerusalem — and successfully building a modern, vibrant state against all the odds on that ancient foundation.

In the final analysis, then, the story of Israel is the wondrous realization of a 3,500-year link among a land, a faith, a language, a people, and a vision. It is an unparalleled story of tenacity and determination, of courage and renewal. And it is ultimately a metaphor for the triumph of enduring hope over the temptation of despair.

AJC Mission:

To enhance the well-being of the Jewish people and Israel, and to advance human rights and democratic values in the United States and around the world.

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