

Israel - a Jewish State or a state of its citizens ?

Israel is possibly the only state where such a question could have any meaning. According to the declaration of Independence, Israel belongs to the entire Jewish people, not only to those who choose to live here. This is the foundation for the 'law of return', under which every Jew has, upon arrival, the right to immediate Israeli citizenship.

This means that Israeli actions are carried out on behalf of the Jewish people and that the Jewish people shares responsibility for Israeli policy.

But what is the real meaning of a Jewish state in the 21st century? What values must it carry in order to deserve this name? What must be its character? Or is it enough for Jewish people to be a majority in it. Is it possible to maintain such a majority without slowly sliding down a slippery slope towards racism?

Can the State of Israel belong, as with any democratic state, to its citizens, and to its citizens alone? And if so what is the nature of the powerful bond between Israel and the Jewish people?

This appeal assumes the existence of this bond, and assumes that the Jewish world feels deeply about Israel and wishes for it to survive and flourish.

In relation to this, I will attempt to establish three points:

The problems Israel faces are not part of a 'phase' that will disappear in time, but stem from structural faults that need to be faced urgently and with courage.

Israel, although a democratic state, cannot address these fundamental issues on her own.

The Jewish people are the only ones who can help Israel overcome the current situation, and help bring about a radical change in its strategy and even identity.

This appeal is a call for help of a new, vital kind. It is also a call for change, maybe radical change in the relations between the Jewish world and the State of Israel.

Zionism, the Jewish national movement, started off 120 years ago, riding the rising waves of European nationality, and driven by the cold back winds of European Anti-Semitism.

These were its main goals:

- 1 To become a shelter and haven for the Jewish people, Tortured by 2000 years of in the Diaspora.
- 2 To create a new Jewish national home, one that would set an example to the world, and be a “light onto the nations” spiritually, morally, socially and economically.

This is how Yehuda Lev Pinsker, one of the greatest thinkers of Zionism, described the purpose of Zionism:

“...Alas, But we are not a people. We are but Jews.

Only when we will have a center, a state, and this state will rekindle the Jewish national spirit, and radiate this spirit as a beacon to all Jews of the Diaspora – Only then we will again become a people..”

Enthusiasm spread like fire. The first pioneers felt that they are shedding shackles of 2000 years.

In no time, the old Hebrew language was revived, The kibbutzim, an exciting, revolutionary idea, were established.

The new society grew in a breath taking speed, and the pioneers guarded their settlements against local bandits. This is how Palestinians were described in our text books.

All this was done under a founding motto of the Zionist movement:

A land without people for a people without land

But the land was not “without people”.

Asher Ginzburg (Ahad Ha'am), a very well known early Zionist writer wrote, in the 1890's, a famous article named “Truth from Eretz Israel”:

“... we are used to thinking of Eretz Israel as barren land, a desert that can be bought at will. But it really is not so. Across the country it is difficult to find fertile fields that are not sown...”

Well, the Zionist pioneers knew the land was populated, yet they used the motto

A land without people. How come?

One of the reasons for this was the common European (Judeo/Christian) colonialist view of the time, that ‘natives’ were not fully considered as humans with equal basic rights.

This typical colonialist outlook is displayed clearly in “Altneuland”, written by Theodor Herzl. The book mentions only one Palestinian, Rashid Bei, who is grateful for Zionism

and its development of the land. It had never occurred to Herzl that Rashid Bei, and many more Palestinians, not only exist, but wish to establish their national identity.

This early misconception is one of the major flaws of the early Israeli mentality that led to deep structural faults in the State.

Today we are eating the bitter fruits of this misconception.

At the time the Zionist movement was flourishing and growing in Palestine, the Holocaust took the lives of 6,000,000 Jews in Europe -third of the Jewish people.

The Holocaust burnt a huge black hole in the Jewish soul.

Traumatizing and paralyzing it for many decades to come.

The only small bright spot in that black hole was the blue and white flag that waved for the first time in 2000 years over the land of Israel.

The Holocaust was final, brutal proof that Zionism was right, and all those who believed in assimilation were tragically wrong. This set the nature of relations between the Jewish people and Israel for decades. Diaspora Jews deferred to Zion, thinking *Israel knows better*.

The State of Israel became the sole joy and pride of the traumatized Jewish people, who offered Israel their unconditional support.

“The Jewish State will act as a European outpost against Asian barbarity”

These words, written by Herzl in “The Jewish State”, describe the Zionist vision regarding its neighbors. 100 years later, Ehud Barak confirmed this outlook when he called Israel “a villa in the jungle”.

Not only did this outlook form Israel’s foreign policy, it also formed the mental filter through which Israelis view their neighbors -- not only as neighbors. Not only dangerous enemies, but as inferior barbarians. Only this regard, combined with the strong will to build a “Jewish state” could lead to the expulsion of 700,000 Palestinians during the 1948 war, and to the destruction of 420 villages – all this, only 3 years after the Jewish Holocaust!

The result of this deep view is that although we have been living in this region for 120 years now, a high mental wall separates us from it. Consequently, the notorious

‘Separation Wall’ being built now, is just a tragic physical manifestation of this mental wall.

This wall prevents any live dialogue between Israel and her neighbors, without which Israel will remain a stranger in the region – culturally, politically, socially and economically.

Ironically, with this creation, Israel has mentally and physically re-created the Jewish ghetto it worked so hard to escape from 120 years ago.

Hostility peaked before the Six Day War in 1967.

Those dark weeks of fear were followed by a shining victory.

Merely 20 years after they had been led like lambs to the slaughter, Jews displayed such military prowess! The entire world watched the young nation with awe.

I remember that period. I was a proud young Israeli Bar mitzvah boy then.

During the glorious years that followed, the proud Jewish world lavished Israel with unconditional love and affection at all levels – morally, financially and politically.

Israel was considered an unquestionable miracle. Warmhearted, usually wealthy Jews visited Israel, taken around by young guides, and shown the many wonders of the new, spacious Israel.

The nation’s mood was at its peak.

Transparent Occupation

Through the wide windows of air-conditioned buses, a journey through the Occupied Territories seemed, for many years, like a journey through a Zionist dream. Red-tile roofed settlements spreading on hilltops next to Palestinian villages in the valleys. The idyllic image did not give away the subtle yet cruel mechanism of occupation:

widespread land confiscation. Prohibition of building and heavy restrictions on any commerce and industry turned the Palestinian people into a captive market, on the one hand, and a source of cheap labor, on the other.

Israel flourished and developed even faster than before, but the hands that held the silver platter of success were Palestinian hands.

Many Israelis quickly and happily adopted the Master's role whilst the Palestinians stuck to their well known submissive posture. All this fit very well into the Israeli view of the world, as described earlier. The inferior Rashid Bei from Herzl's Altneuland played out his role.... Our level of arrogance was unprecedented and growing, but there were very few who dared speak and warn us of ourselves, who cared enough to risk being scolded.

Yesha'ayahu Leibovitz, an Israeli orthodox philosopher was one such brave thinker. He warned Israel immediately after the Six Day War against retaining any Arab territory, arguing that occupation morally destroys the conqueror. He predicted that:

“... *The army will consume the entire people, and the land will be covered with security forces...*”

In his view, the occupation would eventually corrupt Israeli society completely.

And indeed, A vicious circle of oppression and resistance started, gradually making Palestinian life unbearable, and turning the Israeli army from a defense force into an oppressive police tool. I know that because I had just joined the army.

Any Palestinian move or action required a special permit, which would be used as means of forcing the Palestinians to act as collaborators with the Israeli security services.

The 1973 war of Yom Kippur dented our arrogance but did not change our basic Paradigm: That paradigm. The whole land is ours, and the Palestinians are but tolerable guests, provided they behave and know their place.

Since that war, we experienced two Palestinian uprisings. The first lasted from 1987 until 1991 and cost 1200 Palestinian and 30 Israeli lives. But the occupation continued to tighten and the settlements to spread.

During the period of the Oslo accord negotiations, the settlements more than doubled in population – from 80,000 before Oslo to more than 200,000 by the year 2000.

In the summer of 2000 Ehud Barak offered the Palestinians what later acquired the name: “Barak's generous offers”. For the Palestinians, this offer, together with Sharon's provocation, and years of endless futile negotiations was the ‘straw that broke the camel's back’, and the second uprising (*Intifada*) broke loose.

So far, 850 Israelis and 2,600 Palestinians have been killed, most of them, on both sides, innocent civilians, and there is no end to the violence in sight.

Israel is locked in a futile attempt to subdue the entire Palestinian people, 3.5 million people who will no longer tolerate life under occupation.

120 years later

Now, 36 years after the glorious victory of 1967, Israel is in a critically dangerous period in its history. Contrary to 1948, there is no threat to Israel's survival. Israel is militarily more powerful than ever, yet it transformed from being a haven and shelter into the most dangerous place in the world for Jews.

What has become of Yehuda Lev Pinsker's vision?

What is being radiated by the young state?

Our founders' dream of a just society that will be a beacon for nations has soured.

The society now embraces brutality and capitalism brutal capitalism, which are as remote from Jewish values as can be.

Grave economic crisis sends one quarter of Israelis below the poverty line and the public has lost all confidence in its leadership. And this is happening in a state that enjoyed exterior investments and contributions 3 times larger than the 'Marshal Plan' which brought Europe back to life after the devastation of the second world war.

On top of that, we are witnessing the crumbling of institutions that were a source of great pride: most of the Kibbutzim liquidated their fields and groves in order to sell them as real estate. The gap between rich and poor is one of the widest in the western world, Second only to the U.S.A, and education, once the pride of young Israel, is nowhere near the level of the 60's. According to U.N surveys Israel has dropped In the study of Mathematics, from the second place in the world in 1964 to the 39th out of 41 tested, today.

Juvenile violence surged more than 28% in the past 2 years.

Discrimination against the Israeli Arab minority is growing and the Arab minority is drifting away from Jewish Israeli society at a very dangerous speed, and in a worrisome direction.

At all levels, Israel has never been so far from realizing the dream of its founders.

Yet Jewish unconditional, non-critical support is still there as always.

It seems that the Jewish Diaspora finds it as difficult as Israel does to abandon old patterns and take a fresh, bold look at reality on this troubled land.

At this stage, this unconditional support is a dangerous contribution to the deterioration of the situation. It is very much like giving money to a child on drugs.

Israel is a democracy. It can choose its future freely.

This is usually the argument presented when the issue of Israel's future comes up.

This, of course is true. Israel has many democratic attributes, but this, in itself does not guarantee wise decisions. Even democracies can only make decisions within the envelope of their mental perceptions and values.

If these concepts or values are lacking or outdated – so will be the results.

Peace will be possible only when we realize that our opponent's rights to freedom and well being are equal to ours.

This easily acceptable statement explains why Israel cannot arrive at a peaceful solution without external help.

Israel's national identity is a source of dispute among most Israelis:

Are we a democracy? A Jewish state? A combination of both, if such a combination is possible? Israeli society is divided on this question. Is Israel a religious state? A secular one? Do we wish to be either? Again, the society is split beyond dialogue over this issue. Do we belong to the East or the West? Israel cannot give a clear answer to this either.

Indeed many Israelis of Arab origin hate Arabs more than anyone else, just to escape this part of their identity. From this basis of shuffling identities, and the basic Zionist concept of being an “**Outpost Against Barbary**” the majority of Israelis cannot regard the Palestinian People as having basic rights equal to ours. An excellent example of the devastating impact of this false perspective is “Barak's Generous offers”. Without going into too many details, Barak offered the Palestinians an offer he himself would not dream of accepting. The Israeli public accepted the myth easily and fully for the exact same reason – The General Israeli mind-set which views Israel as an absolute victim (therefore morally superior), and views the Palestinians are inferior, therefore they should be grateful for ANY offer from Israel, and ANY such offer should be considered

as generous, because the balance of powers is such, that Israel does not have to make any offer at all.

The acceptance of this myth trapped the Israeli Jewish public in a loop of hopeless fear: One can hear many Israelis saying in despair: “We offered them everything, but they decided to go to war”. Presenting the enemy as irrational and murderous undermines any attempt for a rational solution, and opens the door for panic.

Politics of Fear.

In this situation, were largest opposition party, declares **“We have no partner”** and **“This war was imposed upon us, and we are fighting for our very lives”**

the public has no hope or vision, just fear. The only hope it has is that tomorrow will not be worse than today. And even if tomorrow is worse the leader is politically secure, because he does not have to prove any success, but only declare that it could have been MUCH worse...This explains the public support for Sharon, who offers nothing, achieves nothing, and is heavily suspected of being personally corrupt.

In such a situation, the political system crumbles and the opposition vanishes because it offers no serious alternative.

This is why so many Israelis live in the contradiction between worshipping the military while being desperately insecure, threatened and vulnerable, at the same time.

The more military power is used, the less secure Israelis feel. Very much like drinking sea water – the more you drink, the thirstier you become.

Unfortunately, this fear is seeping through to large parts of the world Jewish community as well. Images of the Holocaust are creeping up, and in an ironic twist, the most powerful state in the region is trembling in fear before the poor, beaten Palestinian people – as if, again, we are the little child in the ghetto.

As usual in a state of great fear, we can only see our 850 victims, mostly civilians, but we have no eyes for 2,000 innocent Palestinians victims.

Another reaction to fear is escapism. Many Israelis have stopped reading the papers or listen to the radio. Others escape to soap operas or silly TV shows. A deep, responsible look into the situation has become too painful or frightening.

This is the power of the politics of fear and this is why Israel needs external help in order to escape this vicious circle which is leading us to tragedy.

The State of Israel is in desperate need of a vision, a beacon.

Fear is no vision. Fear offers no hope.

The Jewish people, the only voice Israel trusts, can offer this vision.

Israel does not need money to buy more ambulances. It does not need AIPAC to support the continuance of the Occupation.

We need all Jews worldwide to demonstrate their care and concern in responsible, constructive ways.

Israel needs a vision of a better future. A vision which will replace the self image of “An outpost against Barbary” with a self Image of a “tree rooted deep in the neighborhood”.

A vision which will replace the false concept of “Land without people, for people without land” with the understanding that “Israel has neighbors which have equal rights to theirs. Respecting their neighbors rights, means respecting their own”.

If you find these Ideas useful, please discuss them and pass them on.

I will be more than glad to make contact with you,

in order to spread and advance these ideas. Time is very short.

Best Wishes,

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