Special Articles
Herzl's Road to Zionism

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THEODOR HERZL'S MOST QUOTED statement, surrounded by an almost prophetic aura, is undoubtedly the entry in his diary written after the conclusion of the first Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897, "In Basel I have founded the Jewish state." To this he added wistfully: "Were I to state this loudly today, the response would be universal derision. Perhaps in five years, certainly in fifty years, all will admit it." Fifty-one years later, in 1948, Israel gained its independence under the leadership of David Ben-Gurion.

For all its almost mystical bravura, the famous statement conceals more than it reveals: Herzl's first choice was not Basel, nor did he initially intend to convene a public congress. As his diaries clearly show, his original policy options were quite different, and only a combination of failures, contingencies, and sheer serendipity—those inscrutable building-blocks of so much of history's tortured process—led him to Basel and to what eventually became a winning strategy of Zionist politics and diplomacy.

First, as to the venue: When Herzl became aware that only a public—and well-publicized—world gathering of Jews might grant him the breakthrough he was seeking for his ideas, his first choice was Munich, a major metropolis in powerful Germany, not a mid-size provincial town in Switzerland. At that time, Munich boasted a vibrant artistic, intellectual, and architectural life, and was also conveniently located for easy railway access to most areas in Central and Eastern Europe, from where most of the delegates were to come. It also had a sizeable Jewish community.

Ironically, however, it was the rabbis and leaders of the Jewish Kultusgemeinde of Munich who foiled Herzl's attempt to inscribe the name of Munich in the annals of Jewish history. But for their refusal to have the congress meet in their city, Herzl's statement would probably have been: "In Munich I have founded the Jewish state."

The reason the worthies of the Jewish community of Munich recoiled in horror from being involved in any way in Herzl's project can well be understood. Wealthy and prosperous, viewing themselves as proud Jews as well as ardent German subjects, the Jewish community leaders of Munich found it offensive and imprudent to be even indirectly associated with the outlandish idea of a political movement calling for the return of
Jews to Zion—it might cast aspersions on their German patriotism and their loyalty to the recently unified German Reich; it could even raise the disturbing specter of double loyalty. It is to these considerations that the Zionist movement owes its luck of not being associated with a city that would have its own symbolic resonance in other, far darker chapters of modern European and Jewish history.

Having been singed by this rebuttal, Herzl lowered his sights and, rather than looking for an alternative major metropolitan center in a major country, began looking for a less visible venue. Switzerland presented itself as a viable alternative—again, due to its centrality regarding train connections, but also due to its political marginality. By this time Herzl was already treading carefully, and, as his correspondence and diary suggest, he passed over the obvious choice, Zurich, fearing a similar rejection from the leaders of what was then—as it is now—the major Jewish community in Switzerland.

There was, however, another reason. Zurich, with its cosmopolitan atmosphere, had over decades been the magnet for revolutionaries from around the world, who found its atmosphere congenial as a place of refuge and asylum (Lenin was to spend some time there later); it thus became known as a hotbed of anarchism and sedition. Herzl was adamant in presenting his nascent movement as eminently respectable and unthreatening to the powers-that-be, unconnected in any way with the seedy political refugees, suspicious-looking revolutionaries, and bomb-throwers associated with the émigré culture of Zurich. Hence the choice of laid-back Basel. Even its Jewish community, one of Herzl’s correspondents wrote him, was insignificant: “It cannot help us much—but neither can it hurt us,” wrote the Zurich lawyer David Farbstein, one of Herzl’s earliest supporters.

Herzl was also satisfied that, despite its small Jewish population, Basel did possess a kosher restaurant, which would make it possible to draw observing Orthodox Jews to the congress. While himself wholly nonobservant (during the congress itself he complained about having to eat the unpalatable kosher food offered in what was obviously an indifferent eating house), Herzl was respectful of the symbolic meaning of religious traditions and understood that in order to succeed, the Zionist movement would need at least some support from Orthodox quarters. How important this symbolism was to Herzl is also evident from his decision to go to the synagogue in Basel on the Sabbath preceding the opening of the congress. He was honored with an aliya to the Torah, and though never a synagogue-goer, he did confide to his diary that the occasion moved him deeply—even more than his own speech at the opening of the congress the next day.

Having become the venue for the first Zionist Congress through a se-
ries of unlikely causes, Basel eventually developed into the virtual capital of the Zionist movement in its first phrase. Out of the eleven Zionist congresses that met before the outbreak of World War I, seven met in Basel; at one point Herzl even contemplated asking one of his associates, the well-known architect Oscar Marmorek, to draw up plans for a "Congress Hall" in Basel, but the idea never materialized.

Yet convening a congress was not, in the first instance, the way Herzl imagined promoting and achieving his ideas. When Herzl set himself the task, in the summer of 1895, of addressing "the Jewish Question," he was at first utterly at a loss how to go about it. As the evidence of his diaries suggests, he initially played with the idea of writing a popular novel about the plight of the Jews and their deliverance in a Jewish state. He started collecting material and making notes for it, hoping to reach a wide audience through a literary medium. (Eventually, Herzl carried out another version of this idea in his utopian novel Altneuland ["Old-New Land"], but by then the Zionist movement had already been launched.) Basically Herzl thought that he would achieve his goal of creating a Jewish commonwealth by attracting to his vision the European Jewish moneyed aristocracy. These were the heads of the Jewish merchant banking houses whose influence and financial power stood at that time at their pinnacle, even as they evoked (and Herzl was well aware of this) the kind of anti-Semitism which claimed that, through their money, the Jews ruled the world.

Herzl had in mind primarily two banking magnates: Baron de Hirsch, known for extending to the Ottoman Empire the credit that made, among other things, the building of railways there possible, and who was already involved in Jewish philanthropy, mainly by supporting the establishment of Jewish agricultural settlements in Argentina; and the Paris Rothschilds, who were already known for their support of some of the first Jewish villages in Palestine, which they had rescued from bankruptcy.

Herzl's initial plan was to present himself before these financiers and convince them that he held the only key to the solution of the Jewish problem: the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth, preferably in Palestine (though at that time, mainly in deference to Hirsch's philanthropic projects in Argentina, he did not rule out South America as an option).

As these ideas were being formed in Herzl's mind in 1895, he was about to return to Vienna after a few years' stay in Paris as the correspondent for the prestigious Viennese liberal newspaper Neue Freie Presse. He was also known as a playwright, some of whose plays had been performed, to modest acclaim, in Vienna. Yet he was not a public figure, had as yet no organization or financial support behind him, and was basically speaking for himself. The idea that he could just walk into Hirsch's or Rothschild's gilded chambers and charm them into following his plans was
totally unrealistic, even ridiculous, and was obviously doomed to fail. Nor did Herzl, for all his political acumen, realize that the last people likely to get involved in such a revolutionary scheme were Jewish financiers, pillars of the economic and political international order, who would do nothing to upset it or their role in it. They might contribute handsomely to Jewish philanthropies, as they did; but the last thing they would dare to get involved in was Jewish independent politics.

Yet Herzl failed to perceive this. He thought that his idea could be launched if a significant number of Jewish bankers would form a "Society of Jews" to finance the enterprise, or if a Jewish Council of Notables could be convened. He did gain access to Baron de Hirsch in his Paris mansion, but the outcome was embarrassing. Herzl had prepared a lengthy oration, and the baron, who probably expected another Jewish petitioner for another Jewish philanthropic cause, was taken aback and cut him off virtually in mid-sentence; Herzl was politely shown the door. He continued to bombard Hirsch with memoranda, but never got another chance to present his case.

For a proposed meeting with the Rothschilds he prepared himself in a more organized way. Herzl hoped to be able to address the whole House of Rothschild at one of their estates, but his attempts to arrange an audience never succeeded. However, out of the careful notes he prepared as the basis for his "Address to the House of Rothschild," he put together most of the material he would use in his brochure Der Judenstaat ["The Jewish State"], which he published the following year and which became the founding manifesto of the Zionist movement.

When the attempt to gain the attention and support of Jewish merchant bankers failed—as did a similar attempt to enlist the support of Vienna’s chief rabbi—Herzl moved to an equally unsuccessful attempt to gain the support of major world leaders. His diaries for 1895–96 abound in feverish correspondence with a host of personalities, Jewish and non-Jewish, some eminently respectable, others less so, aimed at getting him access to the major courts and chancelleries of Europe and the Ottoman Empire. All these attempts failed, as they were doomed to. What serious statesman or king would deign to listen to a little-known journalist and playwright who thought that he and he alone knew how to solve one of Europe’s most vexing problems, the so-called Jewish question? As many entries in his diaries attest, Herzl was aware that many of his interlocutors may well have considered him a crackpot, if not a confidence man; nonetheless, he tried again and again—in vain.

It was only after he had failed to get access to the powers-that-be that he decided to go public and try to build up a popular movement. Herzl’s failures with Jewish bankers and world leaders convinced him that as a purely private person he was powerless and destined to remain so. Being
a journalist and a chronicler of European political life, Herzl eventually realized that he needed public support—an organization, a funding source (until then all his efforts had been financed by his own and his father's limited resources). He had to speak for a movement, for an organization, for masses of people; only then would he be taken seriously and be listened to. Thus the idea of convening a congress came into being.

It is also significant that in the course of his frantic and futile attempts to reach Jewish magnates and world leaders, Herzl's own network of friends, supporters, and useful contacts constantly widened. To his own surprise, he learned that he was not the first to invent the Zionist wheel, that in Eastern Europe there already existed a network, albeit small yet with some resonance, called Hovevei Zion ("The Lovers of Zion"), that was supporting the few Jewish agricultural settlements already established in Palestine. He now also became aware for the first time of the Hebrew Enlightenment movement (Haskalah) in Eastern Europe and the literary revival of the Hebrew language among some members of the Jewish intelligentsia in Galicia, Lithuania, and southern Russia.

Thus the Zionist Congress was born, and the idea became flesh. Herzl himself commented ruefully that if the rich Jews would not follow him, the masses would. Strictly speaking, the masses never did flock to Herzl's movement. However, out of the failure of his attempt to enlist the rich and the powerful, there grew the Zionist movement as we know it—based on voluntary membership, developing representative and elected institutions and fund-raising structures, engaging in education, propaganda, and political lobbying—in short, "the state in the making" (hamedinah ba-derekh) that was to become the World Zionist Organization and as such the underpinning of the eventual structure of the State of Israel. In this sense the statement "In Basel I have founded the Jewish State" transcends its boastful bravura intent. The entity created in Basel—paradoxically owing its genesis to the failures of Herzl's initial strategies—did indeed become the foundation of the very institutional structures that made possible the emergence of the Jewish state and determined to a large extent the contours of the representative, democratic, liberal, consensus-seeking, and coalition-building nature of Zionist and eventually Israeli politics.

The first Zionist Congress was not an elected body but a gathering of individuals who came in response to Herzl's invitation. Although he was still merely a private person, Herzl's name had become moderately known in Jewish circles due to the publication of The Jewish State in 1896. But the lawyers, doctors, writers, journalists, poets, and intellectuals who met in the staid and stuffy bourgeois atmosphere of the Basel Civic Union, known as the Stadt-Casino, felt that, even though they were not elected, they were doing something quite revolutionary and representative of the
Zeitgeist: they were reconstituting Jewish political life. The members of the congress saw themselves—and Herzl's diary entries attest to this repeatedly—as a Constituent or National Assembly, creating, by its very existence, something that Jews had not possessed for a long time, a Jewish political will institutionalized. The painting by Menachem Okin of the opening of the congress, melodramatic and stylized in the way it pictures Herzl in front of the delegates, clearly suggests an Assemblee Nationale, a Reichstag—the rebirth of a nation.

With this in mind, the delegates set out to create both the infrastructure and the legitimacy of the movement they called into being by their very meeting. The next congress was already elected on the basis of a voluntary membership fee, the symbolic shekel, evoking memories of the contributions made by Jews all over the Roman Empire to the coffers of the Temple in Jerusalem during the Second Commonwealth. This form of payment became both the initial financial basis for the organization as well as a symbol of its legitimacy and a mark of participation and membership in the newly created national enterprise. Every Jewish person paying the shekel—whose cost was computed in every country in its own currency—was entitled to vote in elections for delegates to the congress, which was to meet annually. At the Second Congress, meeting once again in Basel in 1898, an overwhelming majority decided that women who paid the shekel would have equal rights to vote and be elected to the congress—this at a time when women did not yet enjoy the suffrage in any European country or in the United States.

The organization of the congress and the nascent Zionist movement followed in the best traditions of European parliamentary life. Congress debates were public, and verbatim reports of the debates of each congress were published soon after its adjournment; in addition to plenary sessions, committees (on finance, education, membership, etc.) were established; between annual congresses an elected executive ran the affairs of the organization. Herzl himself was elected president of the congress and of the movement. Early on, factions emerged, first informally and later in a more structured form, giving rise to the eventual political parties that contested elections for congress—“general” (i.e., liberal) Zionists, socialist Zionists of various stripes, religious Zionists (Mizrachi), and so forth. The politics of coalition-building and inclusion gave rise to the need for political compromise, especially on issues like religion, with the Zionist movement—basically secular and nonobservant—nonetheless expressing respect for religious sentiments and traditions. Last but not least, as recently shown in Michael Berkowitz's perceptive study, this amalgam of modernity and tradition gave rise to the grammar of a modern Jewish national culture, encompassing literature, festivals, symbols, ceremonies, visual arts, and political procedures and activity. The line
from Basel to the present achievements and tribulations of Israeli political life and culture is clear.

The Roots of Herzl's Zionism

Any assessment of Herzl's historical stature must, of course, try to respond to a fundamental question regarding the very core of his intellectual odyssey: what made Herzl, a successfully integrated cultural figure in fin de siècle Vienna, move from his initial liberal-integrationist position—one shared with so many other acculturated, comfortable Jewish intellectuals of his generation in the German-speaking world—to what at the time surely looked bizarre, advocacy for a Jewish state? In fact, this trajectory had already been followed before Herzl, but with hardly more than a ripple effect on the course of history, by such disparate people as Moses Hess and Leo Pinsker. Yet the specifics are always intriguing, in the case of Herzl even more so than most people are aware of, including those versed in Zionist history and myth.

The conventional wisdom is that what triggered Herzl's Zionist trajectory was the Dreyfus Affair. Herzl was present in Paris as a correspondent for his Viennese newspaper during the first phase of the protracted affair. He reported, with indignation and obvious pain, on the travesty of justice visited upon the hapless captain; he was present and reported again, with barely suppressed anger, on the public degradation of Dreyfus, when he was deprived of his commission after his first guilty sentence—his epaulets removed, his sword symbolically broken—all in a public military ceremony intended specifically to humiliate and degrade. Yet, on the evidence of Herzl's own diaries and correspondence, it would be wrong to see the Dreyfus Affair as responsible for his quest for a national solution to the plight of the Jews and for his despair over the fate of the European liberal dream.

The picture is more complicated, and the reasons for Herzl's change of heart are multiple. Though Herzl did report frequently about the first phase of the Dreyfus Affair (the later and politically much more stormy stages occurred when he was already back in Vienna and after he had launched the first Zionist Congress), there is hardly any reference in his reports and dispatches to the Jewish angle of the matter. What Herzl stressed in his reports (which he later also published in the collection of his articles from the Paris period in the volume Palais Bourbon) was the general xenophobia and chauvinism characterizing French public life; its rabid anti-German revanchism (for many French nationalists Dreyfus was primarily an Alsatian, with a suspect sympathy for Germany, which had annexed Alsace-Lorraine in the wake of France's defeat in 1870-71); the venality of the French press; the corruption of French parliamentary
life; the unholy alliance among politicians, churchmen, and generals; the
trevesty of military justice; the vulgar populist outpourings of French
politicians; and the masses' quest for a sacrificial lamb. Dreyfus's Jew-

Moreover, the perusal of Herzl's diaries, covering hundreds of pages
for the period 1895–1904, fails to come up with more than a couple of
mentions of Dreyfus's name. His release from Devil's Island hardly mer-
ited more than half a sentence in the diaries, and even this was tucked
away in a passage about a conversation with an Austrian politician.

This should not come as a surprise to anyone familiar with 1890s Vi-
enna, or to any sensitive reader of Herzl's diaries. The sources of Herzl's
skepticism about the failure of European liberalism and its internal
fragility are deeply engraved in his own biography. The diaries reveal
how much it was the development of politics and culture in his native
Austro-Hungarian ambience, rather than French affairs, that left an in-
delible mark on his assessment of European politics and the future of the
Jews. Incidentally, the number of Jews in France at that time was around
100,000, while more than two million Jews lived in the lands of the Habs-
burg Empire, encompassing not only Austria and Hungary proper, but
also such centers of Jewish population as Bohemia, Slovakia, Galicia,
Transylvania, and Bukovina.

After all, it was in his student days at the Law Faculty of Vienna Uni-
versity that Herzl found himself, like many other Jewish students, ex-
cluded from the local student fraternities (the Burschenschaften), because
the Austrian fraternities, under the influence of anti-Semitic politicians
and writers like Schoenerer and his Pan-German movement, were the first
to exclude "non-Aryans" from their midst. It was the Vienna of the 1890s
that also saw the emergence of a populist-nationalist movement, the
Christian Social Party, led by Dr. Karl Lueger, whose xenophobic and
anti-Semitic politics catapulted him, by popular choice and against the
express wishes of the liberal government of Emperor Franz Joseph, to
the post of mayor of Vienna—the first time an avowedly anti-Semitic
politician was elected to public office in open, free elections anywhere in
19th-century Europe. It was in Vienna, not in Paris, that Herzl saw the
collapse of the liberal, integrationist dream under the pressure of pop-
ulist rabble-rousers, using the vote and the representative system to trans-
fer political power from liberal to conservative politicians.

Herzl acknowledged this over and over in his diaries and correspon-
dence: "I will fight anti-Semitism in the place it originated — in Germany
and in Austria," he said in one letter. He identified the genealogy of mod-
ern, racist anti-Semitism in the writings of the German social scientist
Dr. Eugen Duehring in the 1890s; it was here, in the intellectual dis-
course of the German-speaking lands, to which the names of Dr. Wil-
helm Marr and Prof. Heinrich Treitschke have to be added, that Herzl saw the seeds of the destruction of European culture. It was not thugs coming out of the gutter or effluvia of social marginality, but stars in the intellectual firmament of German and Austrian spiritual and social life who were responsible for introducing, for the first time, racial criteria into modern intellectual, scholarly, and political discourse.

To this Herzl's diaries add an awareness of the brittleness and vulnerability of what appeared to many liberals—and primarily Jewish liberals—as the best political guarantee against bigotry and intolerance: the multinational Habsburg Empire, in whose lands Jews enjoyed equal rights, religious tolerance, unprecedented economic prosperity, and social mobility and protection under the law, all presided over by the patriarchal yet liberal symbolism of the Old Emperor.

Herzl devoted innumerable entries in his diaries to evidence suggesting that this benign, liberal empire was about to unravel, due to the combined pressures of competing social and national movements. It was these ethnic hatreds, coupled with a populist social radicalism, that were, according to Herzl, about to overcome the benevolent attempts at compromise and tolerance identified with the politics of the Habsburgs.

Lueger's victory in Vienna and the restructuring of the student fraternities along "Aryan" lines were only two examples: Herzl's diaries contain descriptions of the ethnic tensions (now totally forgotten except by experts and the descendants of those involved) between ethnic Germans and Czechs in Bohemia and Moravia, as well as in the Parliament in Vienna. Herzl followed the development of these tensions, which were reaching their climax around the turn of the century and were beginning to undermine the stability of the government in Vienna, as parliametary life was becoming increasingly overshadowed by the extreme bickerings between nationalist German and Czech deputies in the Imperial Diet in Vienna. Herzl followed the intense struggle over questions of language in schools in Bohemia, and on many occasions reported listening to the laments of Austrian ministers (many of liberal Polish and Czech background) about the systemic crisis enveloping political life in the empire and eroding its stability. He reported similar developments from Galicia and Hungary, where ethnic and linguistic strife between Poles and Germans, and among Hungarians, Croats, and Slovaks, was endangering the survival of the tolerant, multi-ethnic empire.

To Herzl, all this had a specific Jewish angle: in Bohemia, for example, most Jews, especially in the capital, Prague, historically gravitated toward an identification with the German-speaking population, since emancipation and integration meant for them integration into the dominant German-language culture. When ethnic German parties and organizations adopted an "Aryans only" policy in the 1890s, many Jewish intel-
lectuals and professionals found themselves excluded from what they considered their spiritual home; Herzl mentioned a number of personal tragedies ensuing from this development. When some of these Jews, now excluded from German-speaking associations, turned toward Czech groups, some Czech leaders loudly hooted them out, rightly pointing out that it was only German anti-Jewish attitudes that made those Jews embrace Czechdom. As a consequence, many Jews found themselves excluded from both German and Czech identity, thrown, so to speak, out of modern society and thrown back, sometimes against their own will, on their Jewish identity. Herzl enumerated additional instances from other regions of the Habsburg Empire.

There is a surprising amount of material in Herzl's diaries dealing with the political ascendancy of exclusivist ethnic nationalism in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Herzl maintained close contacts with Austrian liberal politicians who tried to stem the tide of emerging nationalism, and on one occasion even prepared a draft for a compromise on school language policy at the request of the Austrian prime minister, Count Badeni (himself a Polish aristocrat from Galicia, with whom Herzl had numerous meetings dealing with, among other matters, the national and social plight of Jews in that province). Yet all was to no avail, and Herzl followed with a sinking sensation the gradual disintegration of the policies of tolerance and the ascendancy of the shrill calls for an ethnocentric politics marked by intolerance and xenophobia.

It was this awareness on Herzl's part that the era of the Good Old Emperor was drawing to a close in Mitteleuropa that propelled him to the realization that Jewish life in Central and Eastern Europe was in danger of being swept into the vortex of conflicting ethnic hatreds—with the Jews in the cross fire, with nowhere to escape to. That Jewish masses were suffering in Czarist Russia or Romania was common knowledge, but now that Herzl began to feel the Austro-Hungarian Empire itself beginning to unravel, he saw the Jewish tragedy moving to Central Europe, to the lands in which liberalism and tolerance were supposed to guarantee a safe Jewish existence and allow the Jews to lead decent lives and to prosper.

Herzl was one of the first to realize that this was about to happen, at a time when most commentators still believed in the longevity of the Central European equivalent of Victorian liberalism and in its capacity to survive and reform. His frantic search for a way out for the Jews ("out of the quarrels and battles of Old Europe," as he put it) was an outcome of this realization.

Herzl's road to Zionism was thus premised not on an emotional response to an individual tragedy in the West, emblematic as it might be, but on a structural analysis of the malaise of European politics in gen-
eral at the turn of the century—with anti-Semitism only one ingredient in a new grammar of politics which Herzl discerned and correctly identified as being, alas, the wave of the future. In this cultural ambience of Central and Eastern Europe lay the seeds of the collapse of the European 19th-century balance of power and its accompanying liberalism, leading to the cataclysms of World War I and eventually to World War II. It was in Vienna, after all, only ten years later, as ethnic clashes intensified, that a young and not too successful painter was swept into the eye of the storm of these hatreds, out of which he wove together his own destructive brand of racism and anti-Semitism. Yet well before Hitler ever heard the names of Schoenerer and Lueger, Herzl's political sensibilities and understanding alerted him to the rumblings of the coming earthquake.

The Holocaust was only one—the most murderous—consequence of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the demise of a dream of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and tolerant Central Europe. The social and economic tensions in the Russian Empire, of which Herzl became gradually aware once he was launched on his Zionist politics, similarly alerted him to the collapse of the traditional mode of Jewish existence even in the less hospitable lands of the czars. Because of the Russian government's exclusionary politics, Jews were constantly pushed toward revolutionary activity, and the Jewish salience among revolutionaries further ignited anti-Semitism and xenophobic politics.

Herzl's Zionism, combining the best traditions of European liberalism and a modern, basically secular interpretation of the Judaic heritage, was at its root a critique of the failure of European culture, an awareness of the coming crisis in European politics, and an almost uncanny deciphering of the writing on the wall that exploded into the terrible European series of wars and massacres starting in 1914 in Sarajevo. That this dark chapter of European history has not been totally exorcised became dramatically evident with the siege of Sarajevo and the massacre at Srebrenica in the 1990s.

Few followed Herzl's call; not many were ready to internalize the cultural pessimism that informed Herzl's liberal and humanitarian vision of a Jewish state based on the principles of equality and justice. Yet Herzl's tragic achievement in successfully deciphering the hieroglyph of history is emblazoned on the world's map by the existence of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel—a state encompassing almost 5 million Jews, home to a vital, if contentious, modern Jewish culture, based on a not always easy combination of Judaic tradition, modern Hebrew language, and modern science and technology. The tragedy is that so few followed his prescient clarion call. Had many more Jews listened to his dramatic and tragic reading of modern history, it might have been otherwise.
Contemporary Echoes

Paradoxically, some of Herzl’s analysis regained relevance almost a hundred years later, when Israel did already exist, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the onset of a set of civil wars in the Horn of Africa. One of the reasons why hundreds of thousands of former Soviet Jews chose to leave for Israel was that, with the collapse of the Soviet regime and the emergence of new nation-states from the ruins of the former USSR, questions of nationalism and ethnic identity again came to the fore. Jews who had earlier viewed themselves under the Soviet system as homo Sovieticus faced a novel challenge as new identities linked to historical ethnic and religious ties came to dominate much of public discourse. In newly independent Ukraine, for example, many Jews who historically identified with Russian rather than Ukrainian culture, and who were more conversant with the Russian than with the Ukrainian language, found themselves having to adopt a new identity, and in many cases learn a new language. Having to relate to Ukrainian historical memories was for many of them not only an alien but also a painful experience, given the complexity of Ukrainian-Jewish relations.

Similar challenges were faced in the Muslim Central Asian republics as well as in the Baltic states, where most Jews were Russian speakers and identified with a Soviet rather than with a local identity. In some cases, as in Estonia and Latvia, many Jews were denied citizenship rights by the newly emergent legislatures, as they were lumped together with other Russian-speakers as “aliens” and even “colonizers.” It is not an accident that immigration to Israel today from the former Soviet Union comes primarily from these areas—to which Moldova and Belarus could also be added—where Jews are often caught in the cross fire of ethnic, national, and religious clashes over identity and sovereignty.

A similar fate befell the small remnant of the Jewish community in Sarajevo, itself one of the components of the historical multi-ethnic and multi-religious mix that has characterized Bosnia for generations. Despite its small numbers, this community also constituted an important ingredient in the Titoist construction of Bosnia. With the demise of Yugoslavia, it found itself stranded on the alien sea of ethnic and religious warfare among Serbs, Croats, and Muslims, and most Jews left the country, going mainly to Israel. The handful of Jews in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, were similarly evacuated to Israel during the bloody Russian attack on the independence-seeking Chechen region.

The massive exodus of Ethiopian Jews to Israel occurred under somewhat analogous circumstances reminiscent of the Herzlian thesis regarding Jewish survival under conditions of ethnic strife. The civil war in Ethiopia toppled not only the Communist regime of Mengistu, but also
the Amharic hegemony inherited from the Ethiopian imperial heritage of Haile Selassie. The overthrow of Communism in Ethiopia was also an ethnic conflict over hegemony in multi-ethnic Ethiopia, and it was this that made the tenuous position of the Beta Israel communities even more precarious. While focusing primarily on East-Central European Jewry, Herzl was aware, incidentally, of the existence of black Jews, and this subject even came up in his meeting with the king of Italy, which at that time annexed neighboring Eritrea.

When viewed in this perspective, Zionism appears historically as one of the Jewish responses to the challenge of modernization and to the various transformations it caused in the uneasy equilibrium that made Jewish life in Europe possible, if not always easy. The emergence of modern Arab nationalism in the 20th century similarly threatened Jewish life in the Arab lands. Herzl's awareness of the dangers inherent in some aspects of modernity—and especially the consequences of the emergence of contending nationalist movements within the multi-ethnic area stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea—makes his analysis a powerful witness to a malaise in Europe and in world history which is, alas, still with us. By focusing on the plight of the Jews in these changing circumstances, Herzl brought his humanist and universal vision to bear on one specific aspect of modernity and its discontents, thus making Zionism an inseparable part of modern and contemporary history.
Discussion of historical phenomena always involves the element of time. Thus, with regard to Zionism, one may ask: Why did it emerge when it did, rather than sooner or later? For an answer to this question, attention needs to be given to the broader historical framework within which Zionism arose.

Jacob Talmon characterized Zionism as "a Jewish response to the most effective factor in the modern world—nationalism." For his part, Gershon Scholem labeled Zionism "the Jews' utopian return into history." Different though these perspectives are, they share a sense of Zionism as a phenomenon anchored in a concrete historical context. Zionism did not emerge in an autonomous spiritual domain, as Jewish history in the Diaspora is depicted by some. Nor was it simply a natural result of the age-old yearning for Zion, as others tend to describe it. Rather, Zionism was a product of its time, a response to historical developments that demanded a new dialogue between Jews and the societies in which they resided.

A common view holds that the Zionist movement was late to appear and late in achieving its goals. Two phenomena are mentioned in this context: the emergence of an Arab national movement and the Holocaust of European Jewry. Had Zionism appeared 50 years earlier, according to the "late" school of thought, it would have preceded the rise of Arab nationalism and avoided a clash with the Palestinians. By the same logic, Herzlian Zionism intended to provide a solution to the Jewish problem in Europe in its existential sense. In this regard it failed, being late in creating the safe haven envisioned by Herzl: The Holocaust preceded the Jewish state. The State of Israel did not prevent the destruction of the Jews, since it was established only in its wake.

Historians have a difficult time coping with the question of unrealized options in history. However, the argument that Zionism missed a better opportunity to realize its goals 50 years earlier is ahistorical. Just as certain elements may have existed then that would have been more accommodating to Zionism, other factors might have made Zionism's very appearance utterly implausible to begin with.

The argument presented here is that there is an inseparable connection between the history of the 20th century and the realization of the Zion-
ist idea; that absent certain key characteristics of the 20th century, it is doubtful whether Zionism could have achieved its aims. Just as it is doubtful that Zionism could have appeared before its time, it is equally doubtful that its realization could have occurred at a later date. A direct response to the question, "Can one imagine a project like Zionism being put into effect in today’s world?" is "no." Why this is so has everything to do with unique circumstances of the 20th century that helped facilitate the realization of the Zionist idea.

The present fin de siècle has elicited comments and assessments by intellectuals and politicians attempting to appraise the past century. Isaiah Berlin has labeled the 20th century the "most terrible century in Western history," while Eric Hobsbawm has titled his book on the 20th century *The Age of Extremes*. The conspicuous element in all attempts to characterize the 20th century is the element of instability, of ideological and political extremes, of a world cut loose of its moorings. This was the world in which Zionism charted its special path.

Zionism as an ideology and political movement sought to undermine the status quo, challenging the existing division of the world, established society, and the prevailing power structures. As such, it was closely tied to the political, social, and cultural-ideological upheavals of the 20th century.

*The Political Dimension*

In examining the political developments which constitute key turning points in the Zionist saga, the connection between the convulsions experienced in the 20th century and the transformation of Zionism from idea to concrete reality is strikingly evident. For all his energy and imagination, Herzl was unable to obtain the desired charter for Palestine, because he was operating in a stable European world. The great change in Zionism’s fortunes came about as a result of what Mark Sykes described as the "thawing of the frozen sea of international politics," i.e., the outbreak of World War I and the subsequent division of the Ottoman Empire. The Balfour Declaration, a major turning point in the history of Zionism, was surely the product of a series of misconceptions on the part of the British, all of which bore the imprint of the age. British statesmen, particularly those who came from the ranks of the aristocracy, tended to treat the world as their private playground, which they could do with as they pleased. This tendency gave birth to the fantastic idea that it would be interesting to allow the Jews to settle in Palestine, to see what they might make of it. It was this same approach that led T.E. Lawrence to devise his scheme to undermine the Ottoman Empire by manipulating the national aspirations of the Arabs, which led to the creation of modern Iraq and the Kingdom of Transjordan.
In the years immediately following World War I, the international order was still dominated by Europeans, who operated on a Eurocentric basis. It was a fleeting moment in time, one that appeared to embody the apex of European world domination, but that actually contained the seeds of its own destruction as a result of the nationalist demons which Britain unwittingly set free. The Zionist movement took advantage of this brief moment, even though it was cognizant of the risks involved in an alliance with declining European power.

The sea of international politics froze over once again in the early 1920s. The next window of opportunity for the Zionist movement coincided with World War II, which saw the decline of Britain and France and the rise of the United States and the Soviet Union as superpowers. It was the division of spoils following this war that allowed for the creation of the State of Israel. Britain's military and economic bleeding in the wake of the war made it increasingly dependent on the United States and led to the disintegration of the British Empire. In the United States, the problem of Jewish refugees caused by the war served as a rallying point for Jewish and general public opinion in support of a Jewish state. Even the Soviet Union's otherwise surprising support for the establishment of the State of Israel makes sense in the context of the emerging cold war and the Soviet Union's attempt to penetrate the Middle East at the expense of Great Britain.

In 1948, in the aftermath of World War II, revolutionary changes were still possible on the global scene. Around the same time that Israel achieved statehood, India obtained its independence in a bloody civil war; Mao Tse Tung established his hold on China; the Communists took over Czechoslovakia; and the Soviet Union's threat to Western Europe appeared real enough to lead to the Marshall Plan. In contrast, in the second half of the 20th century, the world was divided into two great nuclear camps, making for a situation of stalemate. Changes in the status quo became all but impossible prior to the 1990s, which saw the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the Communist empire. These developments opened once again a window of opportunity in the Middle East.

So much for Zionism's link to the upheavals of the 20th century in the political realm. Let us now turn to the social, and then to the cultural-ideological, aspects.

The Social Dimension

Zionism wished to transform a diaspora minority people into a sovereign nation ruling its own territory. From a social point of view, this ambition entailed a process of migration and resettlement in Palestine of a group that had been largely European for hundreds of years. In myth and
literature, the Jew has often been depicted as a wanderer—the old Jew carrying his bundle on his back—moving from country to country. In reality, however, Jews had been almost entirely stationary from the 16th century through the final quarter of the 19th century. It was only then that Jews joined the general European movement of mass migration that sent millions of Germans, Italians, Irish, English, Poles, and others to the lands of colonization across the ocean. The growing awareness of Russian Jews that the authorities were no longer willing to guarantee their physical safety led to the snowballing of transoceanic migration.

The collapse of East European Jewry’s traditional frameworks of life in the wake of mass migration is powerfully captured in S.Y. Agnon’s classic novel *A Guest for the Night*. Jewish towns were being emptied of their young people, leading to the decline of an entire culture and the realization that there was no turning back. In the wake of World War I and the Bolshevik revolution, this process was greatly accelerated, and it continued during the interwar period. Not surprisingly then, those Jews who were young and daring often chose to leave. Itzik Manger’s famous song “A Tree Stands on the Path” reflects this reality.

The phenomenon of European-wide migration as a legitimate, accepted, option in time of need encouraged Jews to give it serious consideration. It is true that emigration to lands of white colonization, and to the United States in particular, remained the preferred option. Still, once emigration itself was viewed as acceptable, the way was cleared for a revolution in thinking that could lead to the decision to emigrate to Palestine.

The change in direction—in favor of Palestine—that occurred in the flow of Jewish emigration from the mid-1920s on was related more to world events than to ideological conviction. The closing of the gates to the United States in the early 1920s reflected incipient isolationist trends. The world economic crisis that began in 1929 reinforced these trends worldwide. At the same time, the situation of the Jews in Europe suffered a severe decline with the rise of the Nazis in Germany and protofascist regimes in Poland, Romania, and Hungary. At this point, the Zionist solution became the only viable one open to Jews, not because it was superior or more righteous, but simply because the other solutions were no longer available. This became all the more evident in the wake of the Holocaust.

Mass migration of Jews continued during the first decade following World War II. Thus, the Communist takeover of Eastern Europe sparked a movement of refugees westward. For its part, the decline in the status of Jews in Islamic countries following the establishment of Israel brought about the departure of entire communities.

The flight of refugees from east to west was not unique to Jews; mil-
lions attempted to flee. Indeed, the willingness to take a chance and change one's destiny rather than accept a limiting reality is one of the 20th century's defining characteristics. The realization of the Zionist idea simply cannot be understood without this mental paradigm shift with regard to emigration.

The life stories of countless Jewish families provide dramatic evidence of the results of Jewish migration in this century. Consider, for example, a 60-year-old Jew living in Venezuela. His parents were born in Bukovina to a large, poor, and pious family, some of whose members chose to emigrate to South America, but many of whom remained in Europe and perished in the Holocaust. He himself was born in Venezuela, is a successful professional, has a secular outlook, but maintains a connection to his Jewishness. He has children living in both Israel and Venezuela. There are millions of such stories.

The Cultural-Ideological Dimension

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Zionism's link to the convulsions of the 20th century is the ideological dimension. The 20th century, as Yehudi Menuhin put it, "raised the greatest hopes ever conceived of by humanity, and destroyed all illusions and ideals." This was an age in which conflict between the superpowers was not limited to the political realm, but also involved a clash of worldviews, pitting radically opposed ideologies against each other. Capitalism vs. Communism, democracy vs. dictatorship—these were the battle lines of the 20th century. While the competing ideologies were fundamentally secular in nature, many related to politics in terms of total redemption, creating an "all or nothing" mentality. Jacob Talmon took note of this in pinpointing "political messianism" as a key factor of 20th-century life, seeing it in constant conflict with a pragmatic, secular, evolutionary, and tolerant trend.

Two redemptive political ideologies, in particular, played a crucial role: nationalism and socialism. The former sought the salvation of the nation, while the latter strove for the salvation of humanity as whole. Both movements emerged in late 19th-century Europe, but eventually spread throughout the world. In doing so, nationalism and socialism acted as agents of modernization and Europeanization, offering alternatives to classical religion as a source of explanation of the past and hope for the future, as well as a focus for social solidarity and political activity. On the face of it, nationalism and socialism were polar phenomena. The former emphasized that which separates people—a unique culture and a shared past—and strove to preserve these differences. The latter sought to create a new social order in which the nation-state was discarded together with other elements of the dead past. In reality, however, there was con-
siderable affinity between nationalism and socialism in the messages they conveyed to their followers. This is particularly true in the case of nations subjected to foreign rule; under such circumstances, the idea of national redemption was often bound up with social and economic change. National liberation movements, non-European ones in particular, often adopted a socialist agenda and saw themselves as part of the revolutionary left.

Zionism belonged to the cultural-ideological world in which the lines of demarcation between national redemption and human redemption were blurred. In Zionist thinking, the concept of "tikkun olam" and the correction of the generations-long injustice done to the Jewish people seemed to go hand in hand, as part of one and the same march toward a glorious future. Even those trends within Zionism that were not captivated by the socialist ideal per se tended to see Zionism as an ideology striving not only to change the Jewish people's political status, but to establish in Palestine a model society based on social justice. One need only refer to Herzl's *Altneuland* in this context. For second-generation Zionists—those born in the 1880s and after—a constant grappling with the socialist idea, and its synthesis with the Zionist idea, were central components of their worldview.

For members of that generation, impending revolution was a constant presence in daily lives. When a poor, young Jewish orphan in early 20th-century Warsaw would weep on his pillow after an arduous day of work in the company of vulgar and violent men, his friend would stroke his head and comfort him: "Don't cry, Slutzkin, the revolution will come soon!" (Both men later spent the majority of their lives on a kibbutz in the Jezreel Valley.) Confidence in imminent redemption granted spiritual meaning to daily acts. The spiritual energy generated by the sense of participation in history's culmination served as Zionism's propelling force, just as it did for revolutions from Beijing to Northern Africa.

In their efforts to recruit followers, the Zionists had to wage ongoing battle against other redemptive ideologies that made claim to Jewish youth, such as Communism and Bundism. Zealousness, the demand for total loyalty, and intolerance were the accepted weapons in this confrontation. Even within the Zionist camp, incessant battles were waged to win the loyalty of those belonging to the right and the left. Ideological deviation was viewed as the worst of sins, for which the most severe punishment was denunciation and removal from the fold. In a voluntary society, in which belonging was of primary importance, this punishment was akin to the rite of excommunication practiced by Jews in earlier ages.

Like other revolutionary movements, Zionism sought the creation of "a new man," a new Jew, who would differ in fundamental ways from his forebears. The belief in the possibility of human engineering and the
readiness to reshape human nature were characteristic of the age, in which leaders did not hesitate to make decisions that determined the destinies of nations in a single blow. Faith in the possibility and justice of forcing grand solutions onto reality, regardless of costs, was accepted by "enlightened public opinion." The current generation was viewed as the sacrificial element needed to grease the wheels of history. It was for this reason that the young—the generation of the future—were considered so important.

The cult of youth accompanied the Zionist movement along its entire path. "Do not listen, son, to the morality of your fathers, and to the teachings of your mother pay no heed," wrote David Shimoni in a poem that became the anthem of the Hashomer Hatzair (Young Guard) movement. (The addition of the word tza'ir—"young"—to the names of all manner of social and cultural organizations is itself testimony to the cult of youth.) The rejection of the past meant rejection of the Diaspora, of the entire former Jewish way of life. Rejection also entailed a distancing from the petit-bourgeois lifestyle, and the acceptance of the burden of life in an unfamiliar land, under conditions of extreme hardship. In order to bring this about, young men and women needed the supportive framework of indoctrination that granted meaning and value to their suffering, and indeed bestowed upon them the crown of national redeemers.

Zionist history in the 20th century took place in the shadow of the major events of the age—as their object, not as a driving force in history. Zionism did not play a role in the eruption of World War I, nor was it a factor in World War II. It was not involved in the outbreak of the 1929 economic crisis, the Bolshevik revolution, or the collapse of the Soviet Union. But each and every one of these events was fateful for the history of Zionism. Most importantly, while nearly all the ideologies of the age ended up as colossal failures, Zionism proved to be a stunning success. The visionary element in Zionism was necessary in order to mobilize the human energies required for the fulfillment of the Zionist ideal. Without it, it is doubtful whether the spiritual strength and the hard core of activists needed to turn the idea into reality could have been generated. But in the final reckoning, Zionism was able to maintain its humane instincts. Although challenged by extremists, pragmatism—the art of the possible—served ultimately as Zionism's principal guideline.

Conclusion

If Zionism were to arrive on the scene today, could it realize its goals? This is, as noted above, an ahistorical question. However, it seems fair to say that Zionism could not succeed in the current context. Only in an age in which all of society's anchors were being uprooted, in which all tradi-
tional values and all guarantees of existence appeared to be in doubt—only at such a historical moment could Zionism have seemed a plausible approach to the Jewish problem. Furthermore, only in a period that emphasized dedication to the collective, when hopes for total redemption were rampant, when many peoples risked all they had for the sake of a better future—only at such a time could Zionism have channeled the spiritual energy of its followers and created the active vanguard so essential for its success.

Today, the power of collective ideals has dissipated. Zionism, like other "isms," is suffering the symptoms of aging. Its ideological fervor has been dampened; its recruiting abilities have declined considerably. Israeli society today reflects the dominant spirit of contemporary Western culture. Were Herzl to state today, "If you will it, it is no legend," he might well be regarded as nothing more than a writer of science fiction. Still, in the framework of the convulsions of the first half of the 20th century, Herzl's Zionist dream became the reality of Israel.
Israel at 50: An Israeli Perspective

BY YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

In 1945, the Jewish people faced oblivion. Eastern Europe, the major center of Jewish religious and ethnic creativity, was gone; the Western Jewish communities lacked vitality and self-confidence; and several million Soviet Jews were being forcibly assimilated. The most intact Jewish communities existed in the Muslim world; but their golden era had long passed, and they now faced a shattering encounter with modernity and physical threat in post-colonialist Third World states.

Psychologically, the Jews were a defeated people. Perhaps the most devastating long-term trauma of the Holocaust was the Jewish sense of aloneness, of exclusion from humanity, just as the Nazis had insisted. The old stigma of Jewish cowardice had also seemingly been validated. And no amount of apologetic literature, of books with titles like "Jews Fight Too," could erase that shame and even self-loathing; for surely there must be something terribly flawed in a people that was so singularly hated and so passive in the face of assault.

Finally, Judaism—which identified Jewish history as the arena in which God's power and presence would be manifest—had, in the eyes of many Jews, been discredited by reality. Judaism's deepest vision, the redemption of history, was threatened with a fatal irrelevance. The Nazis had proven far more successful at imprinting their vision on history: choosing the Jews—but for a demonic fate, ingathering them from the four corners of Europe—but not for redemption. How many Jews in 1945 could believe in the all powerful God of Israel?

The State of Israel's role as post-Holocaust rescuer addressed the Jewish people's physical, psychological, and spiritual crises.

By salvaging fragmented and endangered diasporas, Israel began the difficult, sometimes traumatic process of restoring the Jews from separated communities back into a people. The ingathering of the exiles has occurred in three great waves, which may be compared to concentric circles gradually being absorbed into Israeli society: Holocaust survivors, Jews from Muslim countries, and immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Israel fulfilled the post-Holocaust Jewish commitment to rescue endangered Jews in any part of the globe, no matter how inaccessible. Saving Jews in "countries of distress"—the official Israeli designation for persecuted Jewish communities—remained a central goal of the state, be-
ginning with Yemenite Jewry in 1948 and culminating with Ethiopian Jewry in 1991. Perhaps the single greatest cause for celebration in Israel’s 50th year is that, thanks to the Jewish state, the concept of “countries of distress” has become almost obsolete. (Iran, with an estimated 15,000 or more Jews, remains the lone “country of distress.”)

Psychologically, Israel saved the Jewish people from the dissipation of its will to live. By restoring the Jews to the community of nations and creating the symbols of national normalcy—a parliament, a flag, army marching bands—Israel offered them reassurance of their membership in the human race, a premise not at all taken for granted by survivors after Auschwitz. Likewise, by re-arming the Jews and proving that they were no less willing and able to defend themselves than any other people, Israel restored their self-esteem. The fact that, only one generation after the Holocaust, Jews no longer need reassurance of their ability to fight and even feel a certain unease with power, confirms how successful Israel has been in healing the trauma of Jewish defenselessness.

Finally, by challenging the ingathering into Auschwitz with the ingathering into Zion, Israel salvaged the credibility of Judaism. For many Jews, Israel’s existence restored faith in the God of Israel. For if Jews could see the Holocaust as proof that God had abandoned his people, then the sudden restoration of Jewish power meant that he had returned to them.

Inevitably, each of Israel’s “rescue missions”—ingathering diasporas, psychologically healing the Jews, and re-empowering Judaism—has generated unforeseen dilemmas, which threaten to undermine those remarkable achievements. Israel has yet to successfully complete the transition from state-building to nation-building. Instead, it remains a fragile federation of “tribes” divided over the most basic understanding of Israeliness. Despite the astonishing resurrection of Hebrew and the emergence of the only dynamic secular Jewish culture left in world Jewry, Israel has yet to resolve its increasingly pressing identity questions. We endure government crises over defining who is a Jew, but we have yet to begin defining who is an Israeli. Fifty years into statehood, we still cannot agree on our external borders, or on the internal borders between Israeliness and Jewishness, democracy and faith.

The Concentric Circles of Ingathering

Of the three great immigrations to Israel, the quarter of a million Holocaust survivors who arrived in the late 1940s and early 1950s were the most successfully absorbed. The extent of that success is evident among their children. Unlike the Diaspora, Israel has scarcely produced any organized “second generation” activity to collectively confront a
sense of dislocation. Partly that is because, until recently, Israeli society did not encourage introspection, valuing instead a stoical pragmatism. But the more important reason is that children of survivors easily entered the economic, cultural, and military elites, becoming virtually indistinguishable from the children of the pioneers.

The survivors’ success is so taken for granted by Israeli society that it is hardly invoked. Yet when the survivors first arrived, they were received with indifference, even hostility. Survivors were seen as the antithesis of Zionism’s “new Jew,” passive victims who threatened the daring spirit on which Israel’s birth and continued survival depended, as if they carried a contagious weakness. Survivors—whom sabras derisively nicknamed “sabon,” soap—were even accused of having been collaborators, their very survival suspect.

In part, survivors succeeded despite the hostility because Israeli society was familiar enough for them to absorb its codes. Unlike Sephardim, or immigrants from Arab countries, who came expecting the Holy Land and discovered instead a secular socialist state, survivors did not experience a drastic disorientation. Israel’s ideological obsessions and schisms, and almost all its political parties, were rooted in pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe. The fact that at least some survivors had acquaintances among those who had immigrated before the war and now occupied positions within the state bureaucracy further increased their advantage over Sephardim.

But the decisive factor in the survivors’ integration was their ability to see in Israel’s struggles and triumphs a projection and a vindication of their own lives. Far from being an enervating influence, survivors infused Israeli society with the certainty that failure was not an option, that Israel’s role was to deprive the Nazis of the final word on Jewish history. The survivors’ grim optimism, coupled with the naive vigor of the native-born, insured that Israel would overcome the external threats and internal chaos of its early years. Together with the sabras, survivors formed the core of an emerging Israeli identity.

The process of absorbing the Holocaust itself into Israeli identity began with the 1961 Eichmann trial, the first time Israelis collectively confronted the Final Solution. Unlike the earlier trial involving wartime Hungarian Zionist leader Rudolf Kastner, suspected of collaborating with Adolf Eichmann and thereby confirming sabra stereotypes about survivors, this time the murderers rather than the victims were in the dock.

The 1967 Six Day War freed Israelis from any lingering insecurities about Jewish passivity; the 1973 Yom Kippur War, which nearly ended in Israeli defeat and produced televised images of Israeli POWs with padlocked hands, enabled Israelis to identify with the vulnerability of Europe’s Jews. A more mature Israel confronted the Holocaust without the
need for heroes and myths; Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations stopped focusing obsessively on partisans and ghetto fighters and allowed the nation to mourn its dead. Survivors were finally celebrated as a national resource. For many young secularists, the Holocaust became the most compelling part of their Jewish identities—ironic, given the initial sabra contempt for Holocaust victims as the antithesis of Israeliness.

The final chapter in Israeli reconciliation with the Holocaust and its victims began with the 1977 election of Likud leader Menachem Begin, the first Israeli prime minister to have spent at least part of the Holocaust years in Europe (as a prisoner in the Soviet Gulag). As if deliberately overcompensating for the imposed silence of the state’s early years, Begin incessantly invoked the Holocaust, citing it as justification for his hard-line policies.

Crucially, Begin broke the Holocaust’s ethnic barrier, expanding the circle of mourning to include Sephardim and transforming the Holocaust from a dividing to a unifying factor. Until Begin, many Sephardim saw the Holocaust as an “Ashkenazi,” rather than a “Jewish,” trauma. No real effort had been made by the Labor Party’s Ashkenazi leadership to draw Sephardim into a common grief. By becoming the first Ashkenazi politician to acknowledge the social wrongs done to Sephardim, championing their grievances and emotionally embracing them as fellow Jews, Begin enabled Sephardim to reciprocate and vicariously share his trauma. In opening up Holocaust memory to all Jews, Begin reinforced national cohesiveness and accelerated the integration of Sephardim into Israeliness.

The Sephardim

Unlike Ashkenazim, who moved to Israel singly or as constricted nuclear families, the nearly one million Sephardim constituting the second great immigration wave came en masse, as extended families and communities. The Jewish state rescued ancient diasporas that faced almost certain uprooting and disintegration in the post-colonialist era, retrieving them from the peripheries of the Jewish world back to its Israeli center.

Within Israel itself, though, Sephardim were largely relegated to the nation’s physical and cultural peripheries. Many were brought without consent to isolated border settlements with little hope of economic advancement; in schools, Sephardi children were routinely shunted onto trade rather than academic tracks. An entire culture was dismissed by the Ashkenazi Labor establishment as primitive and irrelevant to Israeli reality. Sephardi music was not played on the radio; Sephardi history was not taught in schools. A generation of young Sephardim were raised in shame and self-loathing.
Even more than economic and social dislocation, Sephardim suffered a spiritual trauma: In fulfilling their deepest religious myth of return to Zion, they experienced their first mass religious breakdown. In the early years of the state, an active policy of secular coercion was aimed at the bewildered Sephardi immigrants. Young people were sent to kibbutzim where they were forced to work on Shabbat and eat nonkosher food; the sidelocks of Yemenite children were cut by absorption officials. There were instances of parents being denied employment for not sending their children to secular schools. Though no conclusive proof has emerged to substantiate persistent charges that Yemenite children were kidnapped by government officials in the state’s early years and adopted by Ashkenazim, the “stolen children” serve as a useful metaphor for the cultural fate of an entire generation.

The Labor establishment—which had, after all, initiated the rescue and resettlement of the Sephardim—meant well. Its intention was to hasten the integration of Sephardim by turning their children into its vision of model Israelis. In the prestate years, Labor’s Ashkenazi leaders had assumed they were preparing the infrastructure for the eventual absorption of the masses of Jews they had left behind in Europe; after the Holocaust, though, the masses who appeared in Zion were Sephardim. They were the “wrong” Jews: mystical, poorly educated, lacking socialist enthusiasm. In its awkward and ultimately counter-productive way, Labor tried to remake them into the “right” Jews.

Labor leaders were riveted to what they saw as the two essential dramas of Zionism: the transition from “Holocaust to rebirth” and the creation of a socialist state. In both those dramas, Sephardim were largely extraneous. And so they became extraneous Israelis.

In recent years, though, Sephardim, who today form about half the population, have made some significant inroads. Membership in the mainstream is no longer defined by ethnicity but class: Sephardim who make it into the middle class are considered fully “Israeli.” Increasingly, Israeli culture, especially popular music, is becoming a fusion of East-West influences, replacing Western dominance. Politically, Sephardim occupy half the cabinet positions in the Netanyahu government, an unprecedented achievement. Within the Labor Party too, chairman Ehud Barak is attempting to open party leadership to activists from “the neighborhoods”—the Israeli euphemism referring to working-class Sephardi areas. Barak’s 1997 public apology to Sephardim for Labor’s old patronizing attitude was a courageous attempt to heal ethnic bitterness; not since Menachem Begin had any Ashkenazi politician spoken so movingly about the traumatic Sephardi experience of homecoming.

Tragically, however, just as Israeli society is finally becoming openly pluralistic, increasing numbers of Sephardim are opting for ultra-
Orthodox separatism. With its ten parliamentary seats, the ultra-Orthodox Sephardi Shas has become the country's third-largest party. Its short-term goal is leading the tradition-minded but religiously flexible Sephardi working class into ultra-Orthodox separatism; its long-term goal is transforming Israel into a theocracy. By emphasizing religion over peoplehood as the essential criterion for defining Jewishness, Shas excludes its constituency from a mainstream Israeli identity. Shas's network of elementary schools stresses religious, not secular, studies, insuring that its graduates will remain economically marginal. (Those schools also ignore the Holocaust, undermining Menachem Begin's achievement of drawing Sephardim into Holocaust memory.) Increasing numbers of Shas's young men opt for yeshivah deferments from the army, depriving them of another key entry point into the Israeli mainstream.

Shas has succeeded politically because it addresses the Sephardi longing for a return to their lost Diaspora intactness, for a way to the elusive Holy Land. Shas is the inevitable backlash, one generation later, against Labor's cultural coercion, the counter-revolution against secular Zionism. Ultra-Orthodox Yemenite rabbi Amnon Yitzhak, who has inspired thousands of Sephardim to abandon secularism, likes to end his revivalist-style rallies by cutting off young men's pony tails—avenging the shearing of Yemenite children's sidelocks in the state's early years.

And yet, however understandable, the Shas backlash poses one of the most serious threats to Israeli cohesiveness, joining Ashkenazi-Sephardi tensions to the far more explosive secular-religious divide.

The Soviet Jews

While Israel saved Sephardi communities from potential physical threat, its rescue mission of Soviet Jews preempted their cultural and spiritual disappearance. The very existence of Israel saved Soviet Jewry from oblivion: Without the decisive pull of Zionist pride to counter the forced assimilation of Soviet Jewry, that last repository of Eastern European Jewish genius would have been lost to the Jewish people, and its disappearance almost certainly made irreversible by the time the Communist regime fell. For most Soviet Jews, raised in an atmosphere of militant atheism, Judaism was inaccessible; and so the Soviet Jewish renaissance focused instead on national identity. Israel and its military victories, especially the Six Day War, emboldened thousands of young Jews to form the Soviet Union's only mass, nationwide, dissident movement.

The immigration of one million Soviet Jews—nearly 200,000 in the 1970s and the rest since 1989—completes a historical process begun a century ago, when the first Zionist pioneers set out from Russia and pre-
pared the foundation for a Jewish state. No group of immigrants has been absorbed more quickly into the Israeli economy than the former Soviets; no other immigration has brought with it such prosperity and cultural abundance. The economic boom of the 1990s was largely generated by the new immigrants, who included a significant segment of the Soviet elite, its scientists and engineers and classical musicians.

And yet no immigration faces as problematic an absorption into Israeli identity. Seventy years of enforced Soviet assimilation have produced the least Jewishly identified and most heavily intermarried of any Israeli immigration. Indeed, many newcomers lack an instinctive empathy with Zionism’s most basic myths—including the myth of “ingathering the exiles,” the very motive for Israel opening its doors to them. “The Russians,” as all immigrants from the former Soviet Union are known, are the mirror image of the Sephardim: While Sephardim arrived poorly equipped to adapt to a modern society but with an instinctive Jewish sense of belonging, Russians tend to be highly educated secularly but almost completely ignorant Jewishly. Sephardim came seeking the Jewish homeland; Russians came seeking the West. The result is that the two groups have experienced opposite absorption problems. Many Sephardim lag economically but retain an organic connection to Israeliness; indeed, it is hard to find another group anywhere so loyal to a state that had treated its members as second-class citizens. And while Russians are rapidly entering the Israeli middle class, many remain ambivalent about their relationship to the state.

Ironically, Russian absorption might have benefited from the kind of concerted attempt to educate immigrants into an ideological Israeliness that Sephardim experienced so traumatically in the 1950s. The collapse of an officially approved “ideal Israeli” has left Russians without a clearly defined identity to aspire to. The result is a growing assertiveness of a separatist Russian culture.

That trend toward self-ghettoization is reinforced by frequent Israeli stereotyping of Russian immigrants as mafiosi and prostitutes. All immigrant groups are subject to stereotyping: Successive waves of immigration have so frequently and profoundly altered Israeli society that stereotyping becomes a psychological survival tool, a way of managing excess diversity. But precisely because so many Russians are severed from Jewish identity, they are especially vulnerable to the stereotypers’ message that they do not belong. So far, Israeli society has failed to convey to the Russians that their presence among us is a miracle, that they have come home to be healed from their Jewish amnesia.

Perhaps the most difficult impediment to absorption is the large percentage of non-Jews within the Russian immigration. The failure of the
Orthodox rabbinate to relax its stringent standards and enable Russian non-Jews to convert may further encourage Russian separatism from the Israeli mainstream. An alternative scenario is that the tens of thousands of non-Jewish Russians who have entered the secular Israeli educational system and the army will join the mainstream and transform it, making Israeli identity less automatically synonymous with Jewishness.

ETHNIC-RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Israel has ingathered the Jewish world's most concentrated ethnic diversity. Part of the adventure of the Israeli experience has been expanding the limits of national identity, discovering new, unimagined components of the Jewish people. Only a few decades ago, many Israelis were not even aware of the existence of Ethiopian Jews; now they live among us (though still largely as strangers). In recent years, Israel has begun absorbing its first Far Eastern “Oriental” immigration: several dozen ethnically Burmese families, members of the Christian Shinlung tribe on the Indian-Burmese border, who believe they are descendants of the Israelite tribe of Menashe and who have undergone rigorous Orthodox conversion. (So far, some 5,000 Shinlung out of a tribal population of two million identify as Jews.)

The ingathering of exiles has reversed the Diaspora concept of ethnicity: For Diaspora Jews, ethnicity means Jewishness; for Israelis, it is defined by the countries we abandoned. We are not just “Ashkenazim” and “Sephardim” but Indians and Yemenites and Russians and South Africans. Israelis would be perplexed by Diaspora jokes that end with the punch line, “Funny, you don’t look Jewish.” In Israel, there is no such thing as “looking Jewish.” Nostalgic memories of grandparents and “Jewish” foods do not unite Israelis, as they do American Jews, in a common Jewishness, but divide us in our varied ethnicities.

Beginning in earnest in the 1980s, ethnic and ideological “tribalism” has grown, partly as a backlash against the imposed uniformity of the state's early years, and partly in response to the decline of the socialist Zionist ideology that was supposed to unite us into a single people. The intensifying debates over the future of the territories and the place of religion in public life have further encouraged the emergence of distinctive “tribes.” There is an ultra-Orthodox Sephardi tribe and an ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi tribe, a religious Zionist tribe and a secular left-wing “Tel Aviv” tribe, a Russian tribe and an Arab Israeli tribe. Though they live in such close proximity, those tribes manage to maintain a remarkable level of mutual ignorance, often defining each other by the most negative stereotypes. Israel's diversity can either enrich a common national identity, or it can destroy any hope of fashioning an Israeli
people sharing the same myths of origin and committed to common goals.

**Ultra Orthodox Jews and Israeli Arabs**

Among all of Israel’s cultural and political communities, the two least assimilable into a common Israeliness are the ultra-Orthodox Jews and the Israeli Arabs. Neither identifies itself as Zionist; neither sends its young men for military service, a key factor in defining Israeli identity. Together they form 25 percent of Israel’s population of six million (18 percent Arab, 7 percent ultra-Orthodox). And they maintain higher birthrates than any other Israeli community.

In recent years, however, each community has been absorbed into a particular kind of Israeliness—sectoral, rather than national. Ultra-Orthodox Jews increasingly identify with right-wing Israel, Arab Israelis with left-wing Israel. The result is a conditional Israeli identity, the emergence of a new category of "almost Israelis."

Except for a persisting anti-Zionist minority, the ultra-Orthodox community has moved from prestate anti-Zionism, to disinterested non-Zionism, to far-right nationalism (though acceptance of Zionism is de facto, not theological). Menachem Begin, the first Israeli prime minister to repeatedly invoke God and religious symbols, enabled ultra-Orthodox Jews to feel at home within the right-wing coalition. That process culminated in the 1996 elections, in which the ultra-Orthodox united around Benjamin Netanyahu, the first time the community endorsed a secular Zionist candidate.

Still, the ultra-Orthodox remain deeply ambivalent about their relationship with Israeli society. On the one hand, the fact that most ultra-Orthodox routinely speak Hebrew among themselves—reversing earlier insistence on maintaining Hebrew as the language of devotion and Yiddish as the language of the street—is a tacit acknowledgment that Zionism won. Indeed, there are increasing signs of ultra-Orthodox accommodation to Israeli reality. Even members of the anti-Zionist Eidah Haredit, for example, are now volunteering for the police department’s civil guard, once considered anathema. And yet at the same time, the growing strength and self-confidence of the ultra-Orthodox community is leading to increased autonomy: Separate ultra-Orthodox towns and shopping malls and bus lines are reinforcing the community’s self-ghettoization.

What Menachem Begin was to the ultra-Orthodox, Yitzhak Rabin was to Arab Israelis—the first prime minister to incorporate them into some form of Israeli identity. The Rabin government attempted to redress decades of discrimination by intensively investing in the Arab commu-
nity (especially in education); de-emphasizing the Jewish aspects of Israeli identity; and initiating the Oslo process, which promised to make peace between the Israeli and Palestinian components of Arab Israeli identity.

Arguably, a majority of Arab Israelis want to be absorbed into Israeli identity—but an ethnically neutral one, emptied of Jewish resonance. The deeper problem in fashioning a common identity for Arabs and Jews is that the two groups perceive the very founding of the state in opposite ways: For Jews, 1948 means redemption; for Arabs, disaster. Some Arab Israeli leaders even contemplated commemorating Israel's 50th anniversary with a day of mourning for the Palestinian "holocaust." For Arabs and for Jews, then, the meaning of Israel's founding myth—"from Holocaust to rebirth"—is essentially reversed.

Any attempt at circumventing that fundamental clash of memory by creating a dejudaized Israeli identity embracing Arab Israelis will inevitably exclude that other "conditional Israeli" community on the opposite side of the cultural and political spectrum, the ultra-Orthodox. Conversely, any attempt to draw the ultra-Orthodox closer to the mainstream by emphasizing Israel's Jewishness will exclude Israeli Arabs. Both outsider communities are poised between accommodation and alienation; the tragedy for Israeli society is that integrating one community almost certainly means alienating the other.

The Psychological Transformation of the Jews

After the Holocaust, it could have taken the Jews generations, if at all, to break free from the self-image of victim. Yet, in a single generation Israel has transformed the Holocaust from raw wound to historical memory. Thanks to Israel's military victories—and also to the traumatic experience of becoming occupiers—arguably most Israelis outside of the hard right no longer perceive themselves as victims.

A crucial step in helping the Jews to place the Holocaust behind them and internalize their transition from victimhood to normalization was David Ben-Gurion's audacious decision to accept reparations from West Germany in the early 1950s. Menachem Begin, who led the violent opposition to reparations, was proven right by events that Israel was opening the way to German-Jewish reconciliation; yet that process was necessary to convince the Jews that the creation of Israel decisively ended the experience of exile. Only Israel had the moral authority to impose a peace process with Germany on the Jewish psyche.

Zionism intended not only to return the Jews to the land of Israel but to the community of nations. The gradual lifting of the diplomatic siege
against the Jewish state has reinforced Israelis’ psychological integration into humanity, breaking the stigma of the Jews as a people eternally set apart. One of the cruelest weapons used by the Arabs in their war against Israel was the isolation and demonization of the Jewish state, which evoked for Jews their aloneness during the Holocaust—and helped reinforce the rise of the right in the 1970s and ‘80s. Israel’s diplomatic successes in the early ‘90s, along with the repeal of the “Zionism=racism” resolution in the UN General Assembly, restored Israeli confidence in the promise of Zionism to end Jewish ghettoization—and helped create a positive atmosphere enabling the Rabin government to initiate the Oslo process.

Young Israelis are less inclined than ever before to divide humanity into “goyim” and Jews. The very word goyim, suggesting a homogeneous Gentile world united by its antipathy to Jews, sounds increasingly ludicrous in modern Hebrew. Becoming a nation among nations means accepting human diversity beyond a simplistic division of the world into “us and them.” The extraordinary desire among Israelis to travel to the most remote places is one indication of their growing ease in the world (along with a desperate need to periodically escape the pressures of Israeli life).

In certain basic ways, Israel has transformed the Jewish character beyond recognition. The relief of homecoming, of becoming a majority, has allowed us to relax into ourselves—or, if not quite relax, to at least be fully ourselves without self-consciousness. Jewish timidity has given way to a brash, even arrogant exuberance. That transformation is evident in the way seemingly any Israeli child will spontaneously and effusively speak in public gatherings or before a TV camera, in the way teenagers celebrate Independence Day by bopping strangers over the head with plastic hammers—and also in the way we shout at each other in public places and do not care how “pushy” or obnoxious we appear on lines at the bank or the post office.

The re-formation of the Jews into a nation has shattered some cherished self-images. Jews, we have discovered, are child-molesters and rapists and murderers—just like any other people. No doubt that was always so; but where we once tried to hide our flaws from hostile eyes, now we broadcast them on the front pages of our newspapers. That lack of self-consciousness may also have tempered somewhat the Jewish drive for excellence. Indeed, Israeli education is often disappointingly mediocre. One Russian immigrant offered this insight: “When I came to Israel I was amazed to discover dumb Jews. In Moscow all the Jews I knew were high achievers. At first it made me very depressed. But then I realized: In Russia we were a minority that had to constantly prove itself. Here, we are a people.”
A Nation of Soldiers

Israel’s most profound impact on the Jewish character has been in altering its relationship to army service. In their prestate debate with Labor Zionists, the right-wing Revisionists insisted that the essence of the Zionist revolution would be transforming the Jew not into a farmer or worker but a soldier; and the Revisionists won. The ongoing Arab siege turned the Jews from a people lacking the most minimal military skills into a permanently mobilized nation in which the borders between civilian and military life are often blurred. An ironic measure of Zionism’s success is that traditional anti-Jewish stereotypes have been reversed: from cowards to militarists, from wandering Jews to usurpers of another people’s land.

In a nation that was born resisting invasion and has never known the absence of threat, that marks its history by the years in which wars were fought, and whose enemies offer mere recognition as their major concession in peace talks, the army inevitably dominates. Military service is never far from people’s consciousness—whether it is the fate of a son or a neighbor’s boy in Lebanon, or the more mundane intrusion into daily life of the plain brown envelope in the mail announcing reserve duty, a periodic reminder of the illusion of a citizen’s sovereignty.

The impingement of the military on civilian life also works in reverse: Israel’s citizen army is remarkably relaxed, especially in the reserves, where officers are not saluted and are routinely called by their first names. The intimacy between civilian and military sectors has helped keep the army committed to government authority and to democracy. During the intifada, for example, the army became the arena where the Jewish people confronted itself; each unit serving in the territories became in effect a mini-parliament debating the limits of security and morality.

The army has been the prism through which has passed a random, even anarchic, assemblage of fierce individualists, divided and subdivided by background and ideology, and has emerged resembling a people. Wave after wave of immigrant recruits has been imprinted with a common experience and mission. The unit I served in for my basic training, for example, contained new immigrants from 18 countries. Most of us were in our 30s, indelible civilians in ill-fitting uniforms. And yet, toward the end of our training, when we were formally sworn in and handed Bibles in a ceremony attended by our families—including kibbutzniks and West Bank settlers and Ethiopian women with blue tattoos on their foreheads—we were somehow transformed into a unit. Afterward, we painted the flags of our countries of origin on our bunk walls, as though we were leaving behind something of our old identities.

The experience of sharing the same tent with soldiers from radically different backgrounds has tempered the intensity of Israel’s internal di-
visions. Though Israeli society is one of the most heavily and casually armed in the world, and its life-and-death political debates are passionate and unrestrained, only two instances of politically motivated murder among Jews, however traumatic, have occurred since the War of Independence: the grenade attack on a Peace Now rally in February 1983 that killed demonstrator Emile Grunzweig, and the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995.

Repeated warnings of civil war—between Sephardim and Ashkenazim in the early 1980s and between leftists and rightists after the Rabin assassination—have proven unfounded. The one real danger of civil war among Jews, or at least of total estrangement, is the conflict between ultra-Orthodox and secular Israelis—which only reinforces the point that Israelis who serve together in the army are unlikely to fight each other on the streets. It is largely because the ultra-Orthodox lack that shared Israeli experience of all-night border patrols and summer desert maneuvers that their disputes with secularists turn so easily from resentment to hatred.

The army has established the emotional parameters of Israeliness. When a Russian immigrant soldier named Nicolai Rappaport was killed in Lebanon in early 1998, he was mourned by the nation as one of its heroes even though he was not halakhically a Jew (only his father was Jewish); when Rappaport’s body was returned to Russia for burial, partly because he would have been denied interment in a Jewish cemetery, even many traditional Israelis felt outrage and shame. Rappaport, after all, had fulfilled the ultimate mitzvah of Israeli citizenship; and he belonged to the national consensus far more than the ultra-Orthodox rabbis who would have denied him burial.

And yet, inevitably, as the country distances itself from its collectivist beginnings and gropes toward a Jewish and Middle Eastern version of normalcy, the army’s charisma is lessening. The peace process, consumerism, the decline of ideology, the burdens of occupation—all have encouraged the “civilianization” of Israel and undermined Israelis’ patience for the endless demands of life in a besieged fortress. Increasing numbers of reservists opt for easily obtained exemptions; according to one astonishing report, only 30 percent of eligible men now serve in reserve units. And while 18-year-old recruits in the standing army continue to vie for places in elite combat units, the primary motive for most of them has shifted from Zionism to self-fulfillment, the need to test oneself against experience (though patriotism certainly reinforces the desire to serve). Only religious Zionists, who are increasingly prominent in elite combat units and the officers’ corps, and who have replaced kibbutzniks as the army’s ideological elite, continue as a group to be primarily motivated by Zionist values.
With each successive war, the army has lost a little more of its glow. The Six Day War was the last conflict to produce victory albums; the Yom Kippur War, the last to produce rousing battle songs. Israelis' attitude toward the army is a mixture of affection and resentment and wry acknowledgment of its human limitations: the army, for better and worse, is us.

We no longer delight, as we did in the early years of statehood, in martial prowess and military parades, no longer require proof of our own vitality, our radical break with Jewish fate. We no longer wrestle with the ghosts of the Holocaust but with the very real dilemmas of how to secure the long-term existence of a Jewish state in the Arab world.

The shift in Israelis' relationship to the army is best expressed on Yom Hazikaron, Remembrance Day for the Fallen. On Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Memorial Day, we mourn the consequences of powerlessness; on Yom Hazikaron, we mourn the consequences of power. School and community services emphasize not the glory but the pain and loss of war. The TV documentaries are not about battles but individuals: three brothers who died in the 1948 War of Independence, the Holocaust survivor who lost two sons in the Yom Kippur War, a widow who every night writes letters to her dead husband. Those who fell are recalled not as patriots and martyrs but as fathers, sons, friends. Love of country and heroism under fire are valued, but always defer to personal grief. In the sad songs that play relentlessly on the radio, no enemies are invoked to unite the country except death itself.

PREOCCUPATION WITH SURVIVAL

Despite the shift in Israelis' relationship with the army, security remains a central concern. Fifty years into statehood, we still cannot take permanence for granted. Israel has empowered the Jews with the will and means to resist their enemies; but it has not ended our preoccupation with survival. Israel is the only country in the world that provides gas masks for every citizen, one of the few countries in the post-Cold War world that faces a real prospect of nonconventional warfare. According to a recent poll, fully 57 percent of Israelis are not sure the country will survive in the long term, citing both external threats and internal divisions. We live between fear of destruction and sudden reprieve, moving from the ecstasy of 1967 to the despair of 1973 and back again to the euphoric relief of the Entebbe rescue of 1976. Emotionally, the trajectory of Israel's history is not from Holocaust to rebirth but repeated wavering over the ultimate fate of the Zionist experiment.

Beginning with the Lebanon War and intensifying with the intifada,
large numbers of Israelis came to believe that their government was at least partly to blame for the absence of peace; and so the security threat shifted from uniting Israelis to further dividing them. In recent years, Israel's apocalyptic fears have been increasingly internalized, directed toward rival political camps rather than the Arab enemy. Both leftists and rightists agree about this: that if their ideological opponents prevail, the country will not be merely diminished but destroyed. Leftists argue that time is on the Arabs' side, and that an Israel under permanent siege will eventually fight one war too many; and so the right, by blocking any opening for peace, is dooming the country to destruction. Rightists counter that only by convincing the Arabs of Israel's resolve will it secure peace, and that vital territorial concessions will expose the country to a final assault; and so the left, by encouraging enemies who have not genuinely accepted Israel's existence, is fatally undermining its security.

Apocalyptic fears, however subtly, also animate the secular-religious debate. Secularists see in the growing power of the religious parties the threat of a Jewish theocracy, which would alienate most American Jews and eventually the U.S. Congress and result in Israel's total isolation. At the same time, Israel's secular elite, which maintains the army and the high-tech companies and the universities and the science labs, would flee en masse, depriving the country of its crucial edge over the Arabs and eventually leading to its destruction. Ultra-Orthodox Jews counter that secular hedonism is a provocation against God, who twice before exiled the Jews for not fulfilling his commandments and who will certainly do so again if we continue to spiritually pollute the Holy Land.

The result of all those mutually exclusive apocalyptic scenarios is the inability of Israeli society to create a civic culture of tolerance—and more profoundly, a sense of common purpose crucial to a cohesive national identity. When both sides are convinced that the other's positions threaten the nation's existence, real tolerance or national unity is impossible. Inevitably, then, when either a left-wing or right-wing government comes to power, the opposition feels not just disenfranchised but desperate, as if the country has been usurped by mad adventurers. That despair is reinforced by the overlapping of political and cultural agendas: The right not only destroys the peace, as the left sees it, but draws theocracy closer; the left not only fatally weakens the country physically, as the right sees it, but also spiritually, by dejudaizing Israeli identity.

The extremes of the right and the left tend to demonize opponents. Hard-line religious rightists often refer to leftists as "erev rav," the Gentiles who joined the Israelites going out of Egypt and whom some rabbinic traditions blame for instigating the construction of the Golden Calf and corrupting Jewish purity. For its part, the hard-line left often labels
its opponents as fascists and even Nazis. One columnist in the left-wing daily Ha'aretz, denouncing an innocent billboard campaign featuring mainstream left- and right-wing leaders smiling together and urging tolerance, mockingly wrote, "What Jewish glue can create a bond between the fascist and the humanist? How about billboards emblazoned with the visages of Josef Goebbels and Thomas Mann?"

The country's security pressures, then, affect its social intactness in paradoxical ways. On the one hand, the shared army experience reinforces a common Israeliness. Yet the mutually exclusive positions on how to save the country undermine the emergence of an Israeli people whose factions perceive each other as partners in preserving Israel rather than as its potential destroyers.

Security pressures affect the Israeli psyche in basic ways. Everyone is engaged in the national debate; even elementary-school students passionately argue about the peace process. Everything matters; little buffer exists between politics and daily life, public and private domains. When police cordon off a public area to examine a "suspicious object," we do not flee what may be a bomb but press against the barricades for a closer look. We drive with contempt for each other and for our own safety, a nation of soldiers intimate with killing machines and unable to respect the lethal potential of mere cars. We do not simply go on vacation abroad, we escape; the intensity of living on the edge is alternately exhilarating and unbearable.

The intimacy in which Israelis live with danger and death, the repeated reversal of the natural order whereby parents bury children in military cemeteries, has created a deep spiritual need, an urgency among many to know if there really is a God and a soul and a life after death. Some explore the plethora of "new age" and eastern religious movements, which are thriving in Israel; others turn to Orthodox Judaism. (A growing hedonism is yet another response to the spiritual crisis.) The "return to Judaism" movement has been energized by war. One wave of "penitents" came after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when Israel glimpsed its own mortality; another followed the 1991 Gulf War, when 39 Scud missiles fired at Israeli cities claimed only one fatality, convincing many Israelis of God's protection. The seemingly endless conflict, along with Israel's unique status as a country whose right to exist is still unresolved, reinforces the appeal of ultra-Orthodoxy's theology of despair, which insists that only Torah observance and Divine intervention can save the Jews.

The security situation's ongoing domination of the national agenda also empowers religion politically: Both Labor and the Likud are willing to defer to the sectarian demands of religious parties in exchange for support on the territorial issue. The result has been the corruption of both democracy and faith.
The Transformation of Judaism

By empowering Judaism's essential myths of the return to Zion and the ingathering of the exiles, Israel inspired a worldwide Jewish religious revival. That revival did not begin immediately with the founding of the state, when Jews were still too stunned by the Holocaust; instead, it was deferred until the biblical-like victory of the Six Day War, which seemed to shatter Israel's mundane facade and reveal the country's miraculous essence. 1948 revived the Jewish body, which reveled in its physical resurrection; 1967 revived the Jewish soul.

For many Jews, the abrupt transition from absolute powerlessness to military mastery was too overwhelming to be processed in mere political terms. The result was the first outburst of messianic enthusiasm among Jews in centuries. The religious Zionist camp became the center point of redemptive expectation, with largely negative consequences. By focusing their messianic hopes on the retention of Judea and Samaria, religious Zionists subtly displaced the theological centrality of Jewish peoplehood with the land of Israel—culminating in the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by Yigal Amir, who violated the unity of the people to preserve the unity of the land.

Many religious Zionists, inspired by messianic fervor, have become more religiously stringent and distanced from secular culture, undermining the community's traditional moderation and its crucial role as bridge between Orthodox and secular Israelis. Rabbis have assumed increasingly central roles in the religious Zionist community, which once insisted on restricting their authority to halakhic issues. The 1995 ruling by 15 leading religious Zionist rabbis forbidding soldiers to participate in any West Bank withdrawal attempted to impose rabbinic over military authority and threatened Israel's key unifying institution.

Yet since the Oslo process, and especially the assassination of Rabin, redemption has quietly faded from the religious Zionist theological agenda; the community is far more preoccupied with apocalyptic fears than with messianic hopes. And religious Zionists have finally begun a long-deferred debate over their commitment to democracy and their relationship to the secular mainstream. The consequences of that debate could be an historic schism between Orthodox democrats and theocrats, with the former drawing closer to the Israeli mainstream and the latter to the ultra-Orthodox separatists.

Besides inadvertently triggering a messianic movement, Israel restored Orthodox Judaism, nearly destroyed in the Holocaust, to centrality in Jewish life. Orthodoxy became the state religion, its rabbis incorporated into government bureaucracy and granted a monopoly over marriage, divorce, and conversion. For Orthodox and even many non-Orthodox but
traditionally minded Israelis, some form of religious control over public life is essential for granting "Jewish legitimacy" to the state. Until it assumed political form in the late 19th century, the dream of return to Zion was inseparable from the dream of returning Judaism to Zion. Along with the Jewish people, Judaism too was in exile. Only in the land of Israel could it be completely fulfilled, its commandments and prayers attuned to the seasonal and spiritual rhythms of the Holy Land. Most of all, only in Israel could Judaism resume its classical role as the state religion of the Jewish people. And so what seem like acts of religious coercion to many secularists—for example, banning public transportation and commerce on Shabbat—are perceived by Orthodox Jews as the logical, indeed inevitable, expression of Jewish statehood.

Zionism won the loyalty of the Jews in part because it offered to fulfill their contradictory longings: to be chosen, and to be like everyone else. Zionism simultaneously actualized biblical myth and created a normal nation-state. Israel has tried to mediate between its people's opposing desires by devising the so-called "status quo," which allowed some measure of religious control in an essentially secular society. Israel is not a theocracy; it is, rather, a democracy burdened by an official state faith and by religious legislation.

Initially at least, secular leaders like Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion saw the creation of statist Orthodoxy as a magnanimous gesture to Jewish unity, a concession by a triumphant secular Zionism to a defeated Orthodox minority. In allowing its democracy to be compromised by religious intervention, Israel insured the passionate loyalty of religious Zionists and also neutralized anti-Zionist theology in the mainstream ultra-Orthodox community.

And yet, as the power of statist Orthodoxy has grown, augmented by legislation and coalition politics, secular resentment has grown along with it. The result is that at least some secularists have become alienated from the most basic Jewish identity. Though dogmatic secularists represent only a small minority, they include a large part of the Israeli cultural elite, and their influence far exceeds their numbers.

In recent years, the Israeli paradox of a secular state in Zion has begun to unravel. Increasing numbers of both Orthodox and secular Israelis are dissatisfied with the status quo's inevitable compromise of both the state's democratic and Jewish identities, and want Israel to unequivocally decide between the two. The danger is that any decision resolving that ambiguity in favor of either the Judaists or the absolute secularists will alienate the losing side from Israeli identity.

Though most Israelis are more ambivalent than dogmatic on religion-state issues, two growing constituencies on opposite sides of the divide could determine Israel's future character. If the Russian immigration
continues at its current steady pace of 60,000 a year, Russians will eventually form a pivotal voting bloc, one of whose key issues will be ending rabbinic control over marriage and divorce. And if Shas continues to grow at its phenomenal rate, pressure will increase to expand the power of statist Orthodoxy. The result will be a Russian-Sephardi confrontation further linking ethnic to religious tensions.

Ultimately, the greatest damage committed by statist Orthodoxy has been to Judaism itself. By expropriating Judaic authenticity, statist Orthodoxy has divided the nation into artificial “secular” and “religious” identities. Though most Israeli Jews believe in God, circumcise their sons, give their children bar and bat mitzvahs, place mezuzahs on their doorposts, celebrate the Passover seder, and fast on Yom Kippur (70 percent last year, according to polls), anyone who is not Orthodox is automatically categorized as secular. Even the Hebrew language has conspired to reinforce the Orthodox monopoly on Judaism: the Hebrew word for “Orthodox” and “religious” is identical— dati.

The message that Judaism belongs to the Orthodox alone has spiritually disenfranchised non-Orthodox Israelis, who are made to feel self-conscious and inadequate around religious ritual and study. As a result, Judaism in Israel remains the Judaism of the ghetto, the rigid faith of an embattled minority.

The promise of Zionism for Judaism was to restore it to majority status. Only a Judaism that belonged to the entire people would feel self-confident enough to risk innovation. Yet Zionism brought the Jews home from exile, but not Judaism. In its rituals and prayers, Israeli Judaism scarcely reflects this century’s convulsions of Holocaust and homecoming—the most intense Jewish experiences since the destruction of the Second Temple, and perhaps since the Exodus from Egypt. Statist Orthodoxy’s theology of separation from the Gentiles remains appropriate for a persecuted minority, not for a majority confronting its own non-Jewish minorities. Ironically, Judaism, the religion of history, has become ahistorical, frozen in an earlier time. So long as Judaism remains in exile, it will lack the freedom and vitality to evolve into its next, Israeli, stage. And Israeli society will remain caught in a no-win clash between a rigid Orthodoxy imprisoned by the past and a spiritually depleted secularism incapable of creating a Jewish future.

The Future of Israel

The main work of the coming decades will be imprinting Israeli society with a national identity that respects diversity but offers shared values, myths, and goals.

Israel has yet to fully implement the essential message of the Zionist
revolution: that the Jews are no longer disparate communities but a people again. Peoplehood requires each of its components to respect the inviolate needs of the other, precluding mutual secession. In the Diaspora, Hassidic sects or the Reform movement can adopt any decision or life style without needing to consider each other's reactions. But in Israel, no community is entirely self-referential; anything done by one part of the people resonates in the whole national body.

Perhaps Israeli society needs to redefine Zionism: Acts that reinforce a national Israeli identity are "Zionist," acts that undermine it, "anti-Zionist." In the recent debate over "Who is a Jew?" for example, the government-appointed Ne’eman Commission offered a "Zionist" compromise that respected the bottom-line needs of each side: Israel would empower Conservative and Reform rabbis to teach Judaism to potential converts but would leave the actual conversion in Orthodox hands. In contrast, those Orthodox Jews who rejected the Ne’eman Commission's attempt to reconcile Halakhah with Jewish unity were acting like a separatist community without responsibility to the Jewish people as a whole. By that same measure, the American Reform movement's recognition of patrilineal descent as a way of defining Jewishness placed denominational over national Jewish interests. (Not coincidentally, the Israeli Reform rabbinate rejected patrilineal descent, which would preclude marriage between Orthodox and Reform Jews.) Both Orthodox opposition to the Ne’eman Commission and Reform advocacy of patrilineal descent were in effect "anti-Zionist" positions.

Too often, Israeli governments make crucial decisions without considering their effects on the nation's cohesiveness. When the Begin government embarked on the 1982 Lebanon War, and when the Rabin government recognized the PLO in the 1993 Oslo accord, neither bothered to address the most basic concerns of its opposition; and so those two radically different approaches to the Palestinian problem ruptured the nation and produced at best inconclusive results. Israel can succeed in war or peace only when its leaders seek broad consensus.

A Zionist approach to Israel's left-right schism would acknowledge the legitimacy of both sides: that the right's insistence on wariness of our enemies' intentions, and the left's insistence on respect for our enemies' humanity, equally invoke truths learned from Jewish history. That acknowledgment does not mean obscuring the debate between them with a false unity or avoiding the necessity of making difficult political choices. But by creating an atmosphere of minimal mutual respect, we can begin defusing the apocalyptic fears we direct at each other and realize, perhaps, that dividing the Jewish people into irreconcilable camps poses far greater danger to Israel's survival than the victory of either right or left.

Another crucial step toward healing Israeli society is replacing statist
Orthodoxy with religious pluralism. Expanding the possibilities of Jewish observance will help avert Israel's descent into two warring cultural camps—a superficial secularism that sees little of value in Judaism, a xenophobic Orthodoxy that sees little of value outside Judaism.

Along with Israeli Judaism, Israeli national identity needs to become more expansive.

Israel lives with an increasingly untenable irony: that a Diaspora Jew who has no intention of ever moving to Israel can feel far deeper affinity with the country than an Arab citizen born and raised in it. The de facto exclusion of the Arab minority from Israeli identity was, perhaps, initially inevitable. Preoccupied with refashioning a people from a bewildering diversity of immigrants and defending the country from external threat, Jewish Israel had little psychic space for a minority that identified emotionally, if not tangibly, with its enemies. Indeed, so long as the Arab-Israeli conflict persists, mutual suspicions between Israel's Arabs and Jews will impede full Arab integration.

Still, no society can remain healthy when a large percentage of its citizens are emotionally disenfranchised from the national identity. And while there are no definitive solutions for resolving the place of Arabs in Israeli identity, Jewish society and the nation's institutions can encourage a process of gradual identification—for example, by ending formal discrimination in government funding and implementing some form of national (nonmilitary) service for young Arab men, reinforcing the concept of "equal rights for equal responsibilities."

In fact, the Arab community is itself ambivalent: Arab Israelis increasingly feel nationally Palestinian but culturally Israeli. Many non-Jews—Russian immigrants as well as Arabs—speak fluent Hebrew and live, at least on some level, according to the Jewish year cycle. Devising ways of incorporating them into Israeli identity is an opportunity to further the psychological transformation of the Jews from embattled minority to relaxed majority.

While Israeli peoplehood can no longer be entirely synonymous with Jewish peoplehood, the national identity must remain connected with the country's founding Jewish myths. Only a self-consciously Zionist state would have dispatched planes in the midst of an Ethiopian civil war to extract thousands of barefoot African Jewish tribesmen and turn the rescue into a national celebration. An Israel that is no longer in some sense Jewish would cease to motivate its own people, who, more than citizens in any Western country, are expected to sacrifice for the nation.

The consequence of ingathering the exiles is that no one group, no single political or cultural vision, has been allowed to monopolize Israeli identity. And so there is deep unease. Secular Jews fear a theocratic Israel, while Orthodox Jews fear a hedonistic Israel that is losing its soul;
leftists anguish about the collapse of the peace process, rightists about the collapse of their biblical dream. All sides share a growing sense of tenuousness, of "their" Israel slipping away, a fear of homelessness.

The Israeli experience proves that there are no absolutist solutions, no single ideology capable of effectively addressing the nation's crises. Instead, solutions will come when each group is allowed to see something of itself, its ideal Israel, in the nation's reality—and when those groups abandon hopes of hegemony over Israeli identity. That means accepting the inevitability of our paradoxes: that we are at once an Eastern and a Western people, a democratic and a Jewish state, a secular entity and a holy land.

The logical conclusion to the ingathering of the exiles is the emergence of a multifaceted Israeli personality, absorbing the society's contradictions and embracing paradox as the vitalizing force of Israeliness. The creation of an integrated Israeli culture, reflecting the varied traditions and insights Jews have brought with them back home, will finalize Israel's transition from rescue to renaissance.
Israel at 50: An American Jewish Perspective

BY ARNOLD M. EISEN

IN EXAMINING THE IMPACT of the State of Israel on American Jewry over the past half century, one is struck repeatedly by the resort made by thoughtful observers to a series of striking and recalcitrant paradoxes.

Israel's creation is one of the most important events in all of Jewish history. The sense of the miracle in Israel's existence is palpable and widespread. Yet it proves rather difficult to define in specific terms what Israel's existence has meant for American Jews.

Studies old and new confirm that Israel is central to the public life of American Jewry, but in terms of the private lives of American Jews, Israel remains by and large a far-off, unknown place; in fact, two-thirds of American Jews have never been there.

Though positively regarded and emotionally powerful, Israel is also profoundly disconcerting to a segment of American Jews. On a day-to-day basis, it is apparently without much consequence.

Events in Israel, both political and religious, fill the pages of the Jewish and the general press. The attention given to Israel in America seems excessive, out of all proportion. The "peace process" and the debate over "Who is a Jew?" give rise to serious conversation in Palo Alto, no less so than to serious arm-twisting in Washington. Israel makes itself felt in every American election cycle and looms large in every American Jewish fund-raising campaign. Yet, with few exceptions, Israel has been a non-subject in American Jewish literature and remains marginal to American Jewish religious thought. As Alvin Rosenfeld noted recently: "What are we to make of the obvious distance that our most serious and accomplished writers have put between themselves and the astonishing successes of political Zionism?"

My purpose in this essay is threefold. To begin with, I want to probe the peculiar combination of closeness and distance that characterizes the relationship of American Jews to Israel. Second, I wish to focus on the

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1 Alvin Rosenfeld, "Promised Land(s): Zion, America, and American Jewish Writers," Jewish Social Studies, n.s. 3, no. 3, Spring/Summer 1997, p.121.
role that Israel has played in American Jewish religious thought. This is an area of special interest to me, and one where Israel's marginality perhaps tells us most about the meaning that Israel does have for American Jews. Finally, in keeping with this essay's title, I want to capture through a somewhat more personal perspective what Israel at 50 means for the individual American Jew. My hope is to express in essay form the combination of joy and apprehension, illumination and perplexity, transcendent faith and satisfaction in the everyday that I myself feel toward Israel as it—and I—approach a half-century of life.

The analysis presented here is far from dispassionate, but then again, American Jews as a whole are not dispassionate in their attitudes and behavior toward Israel. That is so even when, or perhaps especially when, American Jews work hard to keep Israel at a safe emotional distance. The pattern of their relationship to Israel is bound up with the most basic ground rules and assumptions of modern Diaspora existence. It is rooted, too, in the deepest loyalties and fears of an American Jewish community still living in the shadow of the Holocaust. Most American Jews are profoundly grateful for Israel's existence, and many understand its importance to their own existence. For them to draw closer to Israel, however, would require a degree of distinctiveness from Gentile America and an intensity of engagement with the burdens of Jewish history and traditions that the majority of American Jews are simply unwilling to undertake. Such Jews will likely not draw much closer to Israel any time soon, barring catastrophe there or here, not because Israel means too little to them, but, paradoxically, because it means too much—in complex ways, and for deeply felt reasons, which this essay aims to describe.

Distant Relations

A. M. Dushkin, a leading Jewish educator in the United States, speculated in an essay published at the very moment of Israel's creation about seven outcomes that might result from the renewal of Jewish sovereignty: renewed faith in the possibility of life; vindication of biblical prophecy; enhancement of Jewish dignity and self-assurance; concretization of modern Judaism inside the Jewish homeland; new content to Judaism as religion and civilization; a new impetus to the renewal of Hebrew; and a new ideal of service for Jewish youth. Commenting on Dushkin's essay eight years later, Arnold Band argued that the first and the last of

Dushkin's seven potential outcomes should be eliminated from consideration. "Faith in the possibility of life is too subjective a concept and too contingent upon innumerable imponderables to be detected with any certainty," Band maintained. As for the ideal of service to Israel, Band indicated that it "was doomed to a rapid disintegration." Band focused his attention on Dushkin's five other possible outcomes, but after applying them to a study of Jewish schools in Boston, concluded that "there have been no radical changes which have been inspired by the new State."^{3}

Ironically, I would argue that it is the two possible outcomes that Band ruled out, for the reasons that he correctly ruled them out, that have proven of greatest moment in shaping Israel's impact on American Jewry. We will therefore examine each of them in turn—faith in the possibility of life, and a new ideal of service for American youth—the better to understand the dynamics of American Jewry's simultaneous drawing near to and self-distancing from Israel.

Consider the comments made at a symposium held in 1968 to ponder "The Impact of Israel on American Jewry: 20 Years Later."^{4} Rabbi Irving Greenberg argued that the Six Day War had such an enormous impact on Jews in the United States because it confirmed the traditional view of the Jews as a chosen people—a people singled out by God or history. Greenberg and the other symposium participants also took note of a new confrontation with the prophetic dimensions of Jewish existence (Dushkin's second point), and the fostering of a general sense of positive Jewish self-acceptance in the United States (Dushkin's third point) in the wake of the Six Day War. It was left to Marshall Sklare, however, to observe that the outpouring of concern for Israel's existence in 1967 had less to do with attachment to the state per se than with a reliving of Jewish history from the 1930s onward—the "cataclysmic history" from which Jews in the United States had remained exempt and which the threat to Israel in May 1967 had seemed to revive. Elie Wiesel seconded this in noting that American Jews, as they listened to the speeches at the United Nations threatening Israel, had suddenly all become children of the Holocaust.

This exchange highlights what I take to be Israel's most fundamental meaning to American Jews, whether in 1948, 1956, 1967, or 1998: *the triumph of life over death*. Israel signifies the Jewish people's mysterious survival against all odds for over two millennia, a renewed lease on life rarely

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granted nations in this world. In 1948 Jewish sovereignty was restored in the Holy Land. A small group of Jewish fighters defeated a powerful enemy, defying near impossible odds. No less amazing, the world saw fit to recognize the new state; Israel’s flag flew proudly at the United Nations. And all this happened a mere three years after six million Jews were murdered in Europe. If deserts were blooming in the Jewish homeland, exiles were streaming to build new cities and a new life in the old/new national center, and Jews were singing and dancing again almost everywhere, this was clear testimony to the triumph of life and blessing.

By 1998, of course, these images are utterly trite in their familiarity. I rehearse them nonetheless because their impact on American Jewry has been overwhelming, and because they retain much of their mythic power even today. Israel remains a source of enormous pride to American Jews, who thrill at its vitality, strength, and accomplishments. This is all the more true when Israelis manage to combine strength with compassion, military prowess with achievements in realms such as agriculture and computer technology, excellence in music along with muscle. This is the synthesis of “Athens” and “Sparta” at which Saul Bellow marveled—speaking for many, I think — in To Jerusalem and Back, a synthesis which, coming so soon after the death camps, touches Jews the world over at the very core and elicits dedicated efforts aimed at securing Israel’s survival.

But Israel has also compelled an anxious confrontation with the perilous facts of Jewish history. Life and death seem to hang in the balance repeatedly where Israel is concerned. Hence a repetition of the age-old nightmares that occur, paradoxically, at the very same moment when Israel enables Jews both inside the state and in the Diaspora to confront the Holocaust in a way that would have been impossible without the margin of safety that Israel provides. Renewed Jewish power and vitality, for all that they remain threatened, have permitted Jews, for once, to contemplate the terrors of Jewish life and history from a standpoint of relative security—on the far shores of the dream, in possession of the Promised Land.

And yet, Jews in the United States have not found ways other than philanthropy, organizational activity, and lobbying, all practiced from afar, to involve themselves in Israel’s miraculous new lease on life. That is not in any way to diminish the importance of these modes of service to the state. They have actively engaged tens of thousands of Jews over the past five decades and have elicited philanthropic sums far beyond all expectations. Nonetheless, American Jews have arguably not conceived an “ideal of service” to Israel applicable in moments not characterized by

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Saul Bellow, To Jerusalem and Back: A Personal Account (New York, 1976).
life-and-death emergency. Most certainly, they have not found ways to make Israel’s day-to-day routines an integral part of their own lives.

The gap between the relationship to Israel on the mythic level of death and rebirth, and the nonrelationship that predominates on the day-to-day level, is enormous. One reason for it surely lies in the simple fact that one can know or, better, imagine a myth from afar, whereas reality, complex and always changing, requires a firsthand acquaintance that is in this case woefully lacking. Few American Jews know Hebrew, and not many of those who do not know the language take the trouble to read Israeli literature in translation. Millions of American Jews of course follow newspaper headlines and television reports concerning the peace process and Israeli religious strife, but not many thousands make the effort to acquire a detailed knowledge of Israeli life. In a 1995 survey, a majority of American Jews did not know that Benjamin Netanyahu and Shimon Peres belong to different parties.

The significant structural differences between the two Jewries further impede mutual understanding, despite shared religious and cultural traditions, a common history, and familial connections. Consider, for example, the ethos of daily life in Tel Aviv, Carmiel, or Jerusalem, which—to the degree that it has not been universalized by pop culture, McDonald’s, and the worldwide patterns governing professional and personal life—is as different from the ethos in White Plains or Chicago as is the landscape. Israel’s ethnic diversity, too, within and beyond the Jewish population, is not that of America. The experience of war and army service, utterly formative to Israelis, is unknown to most American Jews of this generation. Israel’s political system is—for good reason—as perplexing to Jews in the United States as its mix of state and synagogue is disturbing. Finally, the preoccupation of Israeli Judaism with land, messiah, and power, all foreign to American Jews, is cause for serious perplexity and possible concern.

Charles Liebman and Steven Cohen, explicating the differences between the American and Israeli Jewish outlooks in Two Worlds of Judaism, point to an additional set of divergent orientations that work to distance the two communities. Jewish history and peoplehood are primary commitments for Israelis, salient in daily experience and featured

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8 For a more detailed presentation of this argument, see my essay A New Role for Israel in American Jewish Identity (American Jewish Committee, New York, 1992).
prominently in the culture and the schools. American Jews, for the most part, have far less awareness of Jewish history and a much weaker sense of connection to Jews elsewhere. This is so, in large measure, because Jewish allegiances in America are personalist and voluntarist. They must be chosen, one family, indeed one person, at a time. In Israel, group loyalties come with the territory, and Jewish identity is part of a collective experience that is conveyed and reinforced by the very language in use and the history that decisively shapes one's life. American Jews align themselves more with universal values and see Judaism as propagating those values. Overwhelmingly, they identify Jewish values with liberalism. Israelis are more particularist, and their view of the world, like their state, is characterized by borders not always easy to cross. Liberalism is not central to the Israeli outlook.

All of this makes for distance as a rule, with Orthodox Jews on both sides of the divide constituting the single notable exception. Because Jewish religious observance is so central to their lives, and that observance determined by a Halakhah recognized as authoritative in both countries, Orthodox commonality is increased from the outset. It is further enhanced by higher levels of Jewish learning and Hebrew proficiency among Orthodox Jews in America, and by the tradition of yeshivah study in Israel for American Orthodox young people. Still, some differences between the two Orthodox communities remain. These differences serve to highlight the degree to which, for American Jews as a whole, only the myth of Israel—which foregrounds the state's very existence, rather than the details of actual life there—brings near what is distant.

One suspects, for a variety of reasons, that many American Jews prefer it this way. The distance they maintain from Israel, alongside their relation to it, well suits the implicit contract that they, following a pattern set by other Jewries in the modern West, have made with the state and society of which they are a part. Certainly the mode of American Jewish relation to Israel is as old as American Zionism. This is the case whether one considers the political Zionism first championed by Louis Brandeis in this country or the cultural Zionism popularized in the United States by such figures as Solomon Schechter and Mordecai Kaplan.

**American Zionism**

Brandeis, in the course of making Zionism an option for himself and American Jews like him, stripped the movement as conceived in Europe and Palestine of two related and fundamental elements—the critique of Diaspora existence and the insistence that Zionism constitutes a path to self-fulfillment. It was clear to Brandeis from the outset that American
Images of History

The Haganah ship *Exodus*, defying British naval blockade, arrives outside Haifa, July 21, 1947. Its 4,500 refugee passengers are forcibly returned to Europe.

Standing beneath a portrait of Theodor Herzl, David Ben-Gurion proclaims Israel’s independence (May 14, 1948)
President Harry Truman greets Chaim Weizmann, Israel's first president, in Washington (May 25, 1948)

Israel's flag is raised for the first time at UN headquarters, Lake Success, N.Y. (May 12, 1949), with Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett (r.) and Israeli representative Aubrey (Abba) Eban (l.) assisting.
The 1950s... Israel's soldier-farmers build the new state and defend its borders.

Gen. Moshe Dayan briefs colleagues on the progress of the 1956 Sinai Campaign

Between 1948 and 1958, Israel absorbs over 850,000 immigrants. Yemenite olim being fed after long flight from Aden (May 1950)
Former SS officer Adolf Eichmann, tried for crimes against the Jewish people, stands for the reading of the verdict in a Jerusalem court (Dec. 11, 1961)

The Six Day War... Gen. Uzi Narkiss, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, and Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin enter the Old City of Jerusalem through the Lions' Gate (June 7, 1967)

Israeli paratroopers at the Western Wall, the kotel, shortly after the capture of the Old City
Prime Minister Golda Meir, with Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. David Elazar (l.), visiting frontline forces in Egypt during the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Israeli armored vehicles crossing the Suez Canal (October 1973).

President Anwar Sadat, President Jimmy Carter, Prime Minister Menachem Begin, at the White House...the signing of the Camp David Accords with Egypt (March 26, 1979).
Israeli soldiers overlooking Beirut during the 1982 war in Lebanon


Anatoly (Natan) Sharansky, released from Soviet prison and reunited with his wife, Avital, in Israel, with Minister of Industry and Trade Ariel Sharon (Feb. 1986)

Intifada... mass violence erupts in Gaza and the West Bank, as Palestinians protest Israeli occupation (Dec. 1987)
The Gulf War forced Israeli families into sealed rooms, wearing gas masks, as Iraqi missiles caused extensive damage and personal injury, primarily in the Tel Aviv area (Jan.-Feb. 1991)

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, President Bill Clinton, and PLO chairman Yasir Arafat, at the White House . . . the signing of a "Declaration of Principles" (Sept. 13, 1993)

Peace rally in Tel Aviv at which Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated (Nov. 4, 1995)

World leaders attend the funeral of Yitzhak Rabin on Mt. Herzl in Jerusalem (Nov. 6, 1995)

Likud prime ministerial candidate Benjamin Netanyahu, who successfully challenged incumbent Shimon Peres, casts his ballot in Jerusalem (May 29, 1996)
Jews were not homeless or in exile; that they were not fated to encounter an inevitable anti-Semitism. Jewish existence in the United States, he maintained, was to be celebrated and enhanced rather than critiqued or abandoned. The aim of Zionism in America, therefore, was to secure a comparable homeland in Palestine for the millions of Jews who needed it; the means for accomplishing this task were political and philanthropic. Emigration was not to be expected or urged. American Zionists did not envision being "built up" by the land of Israel as they helped to build up that land, on the ground. Indeed, they hoped to export an American version of fulfillment—including such "prophetic" ideals as freedom, equality of opportunity, individual responsibility, and technological know-how—to Palestine. This has of course remained the American Zionist credo until the present day.

No less so, Schechter and the other communal leaders who transplanted cultural Zionism to American shores made significant alterations in the doctrine set forth by the leading European theoretician of that school of thought, Ahad Ha'am. They agreed that Jews in America, as elsewhere, all too often languished in spiritual exile; that knowledge of Jewish history and acquaintance with the Hebrew language were at a low level; and that religious practice was giving way to secularization and assimilation. Schechter and Kaplan followed Ahad Ha'am's lead in arguing that the immediate aim of Zionism should be the establishment of a "spiritual center" in Palestine, which would nurture the development of a revived Jewish culture that could then be exported to Jews throughout the world. However, Schechter stressed the need for a spiritual center in Palestine precisely so that Jewish culture—and with it Jewish religion—could be renewed in the United States, no less than in Palestine. With the assistance of the new center in Palestine, Schechter maintained, a religious flowering of Judaism could take place in the United States.

The center was to serve its periphery. Ahad Ha'am too had envisioned this, but he had not imagined that religion could "trump" culture in the way that Schechter and others in America argued. This too is a point of view that has endured, as evident in Kaplan's stunning reformulation of the purpose of Zionism in 1955: "Zionism has to be redefined so as to assure a permanent place for Diaspora Judaism." Israel's role, Kaplan continued, should be "based on the desire to provide the setting in which the Jewish People could become a fit instrument of this-worldly salvation for every Jew, wherever he resides."10

A distinctive American variant of Zionism found expression in a vari-

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ety of ways. For example, when the Zionist Organization of America adopted a platform in 1918, it stressed progressive principles of pluralist democracy and a mixed public-private economy. Similarly, Arthur Goren has indicated how the ideal of the halutz, the pioneer, was Americanized for promotion here. The dominant image became that of the young intellectual or professional who left a promising career in order to redeem the land and build a moral society. In institutional terms, the Young Judaea movement rejected pioneering elitism in favor of an “all-Jewish program” addressed to the masses of Jews, while Habonim declared itself in favor of a Zionism born of individual choice. The decision to become a halutz, it was argued, should be private, reached without coercion, and undertaken for positive reasons. Such distinctively American permissiveness and pluralism, Goren observes, ran counter to European Zionist notions of party discipline and ideological collectivism. “Limited halutziat,” rather than emigration, became the order of the day—service to Israel through summer camps, study programs, and the like.

American Jewish responses to the Zionist idea reflected genuine national feeling and a strong Jewish commitment. At the same time, it is clear that American Zionists took their cue from the American scene. Zionist, and later Jewish communal, leaders, have consistently striven to strike the proper balance between minority citizenship in a developing American democracy and Jewish loyalties arising out of common history, shared religious commitments, and an enduring sense of Jewish peoplehood. As part of the effort to harmonize these two commitments, the Jews in Palestine were for a long time depicted as people not unlike those in the United States, committed to ideals not unlike those that animated Americans, but not yet fortunate enough to enjoy the full blessings of America. The job of American Jews was not to join them there, but to help them from here; to change Jewish history rather than to change American Jews, much less America.

The famous agreement reached in 1950 between Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion and American Jewish Committee president Jacob Blaustein gave classic expression to an understanding of the proper relationship between citizenship in the United States and membership in the Jewish people. Ben-Gurion wrote in his letter:

The Jews of the United States, as a community and as individuals, have only one political attachment and that is to the United States of America. They owe no political allegiance to Israel. . . . We, the people of Israel, have no

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desire and no intention to interfere in any way with the internal affairs of Jewish communities abroad. The Government and the people of Israel fully respect the right and integrity of the Jewish communities in other countries to develop their own mode of life and their indigenous social, economic and cultural institutions in accordance with their own needs and aspirations.

In his response, Blaustein paid tribute to Israel’s great progress and expressed confidence in the new nation’s ability to overcome the difficult problems it still faced. On behalf of the American Jewish Committee, he promised: “We shall do all we can to increase further our share in the great historic task of helping Israel to solve its problems and develop as a free, independent and flourishing democracy.”

In line with the Ben-Gurion-Blaustein agreement, American Jewish public life would concern itself in part with voluntary assistance to Israel, and for the rest with the welfare of the American Jewish community. Both elements were important to the assertion of collective Jewish identity in the United States and contributed mightily to the maintenance of Jewish distinctiveness. For many Jews in America, over an extended period, communal commitments focused on Israel defined the essence of their Jewishness. Still, as far as American Jewry as a whole was concerned, Israel was not in the forefront of consciousness or of Jewish public life prior to 1967. Neither Israel nor the Holocaust was even mentioned in the questions posed in an August 1966 Commentary symposium on “The State of Jewish Belief,” and none of the respondents saw fit to bring them up.

After 1967—with the Six Day War’s traumatic reminder of the singled-out Jewish condition, followed by Israel’s miraculous deliverance—Israel took center stage in American Jewish public life, a position it held for over two decades. The mythic meaning of Israel to American Jews, operating at the deepest level of personal existence, became joined to the dominant communal agenda, operating at the most visible level in newspapers, meetings, and philanthropy. In this context, the unity of the Jewish people and the centrality of Israel to Jewish life became key elements in Jewish civil religion. Jewish giving to Israel increased dramatically. Jack Wertheimer points out that American Jews gave over $100 million in the two-week period between May 22 and June 10, 1967, and have since donated about $6 billion to Israel via the United Jewish Appeal alone. Parallel to this, Israel’s place on the agenda of Jewish organizational life has grown enormously. As Wertheimer indicates:

12In Vigilant Brotherhood: The American Jewish Committee’s Relationship to Palestine and Israel (American Jewish Committee, New York, 1964), pp. 54–55.
In the 1970s, then, sectors of the organized community that previously had paid scant attention to Israel-related matters now threw their energies and resources into such lobbying. The Council of Jewish Federations formed an Israel Task Force, and the community relations field shifted much of its personnel and budget to the task of explaining Israel's needs to the American public. In the early 1970s, for example, NJCRAC estimated that 65 percent of its budget was spent on activities for Israel and Soviet Jewry. The American Jewish Committee spent between 25 and 50 percent of its budgets on Israel-related programs, while the ADL allocated 30 percent to Israel programming.

There is some evidence that in the last few years Israel's importance for American Jews, both mythic and public, has diminished somewhat. The policies of the current Israeli government are far less popular in the United States, both among Jews and in Washington, than those of its predecessor, and the continuing attempts by Orthodox Jews in Israel to delegitimize and exclude other forms of Judaism have made the situation worse. Moreover, these developments have coincided with an American Jewish communal agenda increasingly focused on "continuity," with funding priorities shifted to "local needs" such as education.

At the same time, American Jews are expressing more interest than ever before in spirituality and/or religion, and are more inclined than ever toward "universalist" and "personalist" aspects of Jewishness rather than the "ethnic" dimensions of Jewish existence. They are correspondingly less inclined than in past decades to award Israel a significant role in their Jewish emotional loyalties. Asked in a recent survey by Steven M. Cohen whether they agreed that Israel is "critical to sustaining American Jewish life," just over half of a representative sample of American Jews agreed that it was; asked "how emotionally attached are you to Israel?" only 27 percent said they were "extremely" or "very" attached (down from 37 percent as recently as 1988), while 42 percent said they were "somewhat attached" and over 25 percent said "not attached." About a third saw Israel as extremely important to their own sense of being Jewish—fewer, Cohen notes, than "those who said the same for the Torah, High Holidays, the Jewish family, American anti-Semitism, the Jewish people, and the Holocaust (where, for each, about half the sample answered in like fashion)."

I would contend that the disengagement indicated by these developments is not merely the effect of current Israeli government policy or of recurring conflicts over "Who is a Jew?" Rather, it represents still another

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14 Ibid., pp. 54–55.
attempt to fine-tune the pattern of distance and relationship that has always characterized the American Jewish approach to Israel. An examination of Israel’s place in American Jewish religious thought will provide further insight into the dynamics of this process.

**God, Torah, Israel, and the State**

Scholars of contemporary Judaism have made much of the fact that Abraham Joshua Heschel, without question one of the most profound and influential Jewish thinkers to have worked in the United States in the century, conceived of Judaism as a religion that “sanctifies time rather than space.” Heschel certainly did not intend this as an argument on behalf of the Diaspora or against a territorial homeland. His point had much more to do with the distinction between Sabbath and weekday, the actual context in which he used the phrase, or, in a larger sense, between spirit and normalcy—between the demand for justice and the practice of business as usual. Heschel’s contrast between space and time somewhat matches the categories of Joseph Soloveitchik, the leading American Orthodox thinker, who distinguishes between the world of “majesty” and the world of “covenant.” We misunderstand Heschel and Soloveitchik if we read them as dismissing the importance of the land or State of Israel. But we also misread them if we fail to see that neither they nor other American Jewish religious thinkers have placed land and state at the center of their thought. Here, too, both distance and relationship are apparent.¹⁶

Consider, for example, a passage in the only work by Heschel in which he deals at any length with the State of Israel—*Israel: An Echo of Eternity*—written, not coincidentally, in the wake of the Six Day War. Heschel offers praise to Jerusalem, surveys its role in Jewish faith, and traces the Jewish people’s “covenant of engagement” to the land of Israel over the ages. He then enlarges on the centuries-long story of Jewish longing for return to the land of Israel, and argues that, while the creation of the State of Israel is in no way an “answer to Auschwitz,” it does “enable us to bear the agony of Auschwitz without radical despair.” Then comes the following passage:

> Our imperishable homeland is in God’s time. We enter God’s time through the gate of sacred deeds. The deeds, acts of sanctifying time, are the old an-

cestral ground where we meet Him again and again. The great sacred deed for us today is to build the land of Israel.\textsuperscript{17}

In this passage, "homeland" remains a metaphor until the final sentence. It is imperishable—eternal rather than temporal, spiritual rather than material, and as such necessarily attainable in every time and place. Zionism and the State of Israel enter this passage only through the category of the sacred deed, a paramount sacred deed to which Jews in this time are called. Thus Heschel chastises American Jews for having taken Israel's existence for granted until the Six Day War. Israel's rebirth is cause for wonder and celebration, though not for \textit{aliyah}, which is nowhere recommended. Israel's existence should be taken as "a challenge . . . an urging for spiritual renewal, for moral re-examination," but not as the reason for any larger questioning of the fundamentals of Jewish life in the United States.

A similar pattern is evident in the work of Soloveitchik, who barely mentions Israel in most of his writings and deals with it extensively only when Israel's status as a sign of God's continuing providence over the Jewish people is the issue. In his classic essay "Hark, My Beloved Knocks," published in 1956, Soloveitchik argued that the establishment of the State of Israel was proof that the hiding of God's countenance in the Holocaust had come to an end: "Let us not view this matter lightly! It is the voice of my Beloved that knocketh!"\textsuperscript{18} In this case, the response demanded apparently is \textit{aliyah}, though the word is never used. But note that Soloveitchik urges participation in a divine rather than a human project. Moreover, he goes on to argue that the building of the Jewish homeland, if it is to retain God's blessing, must follow the dictates of Torah. In a series of addresses to Orthodox Zionist audiences, Soloveitchik chastised Orthodox Jews for not appreciating and joining in the divine activity under way in Israel.\textsuperscript{19} At the same time, he made it clear that only Jews loyal to the Torah were fit to direct those efforts on the ground. Note too the following declaration in an essay by Soloveitchik offering support to Israel's religious parties:

\begin{quote}
I understand the greatness, value and importance of the State, the wonder of its establishment and preservation, only from the point of view of the
\end{quote}


uniqueness of the people of Israel and its relation to the God of Israel. As a secular-historical entity that is not animated by any covenantal goal, the State does not excite me... And I cannot imagine any tie between the Jews of the Diaspora and a State insofar as it is secular.\textsuperscript{20}

As American Jewish thinkers, both Heschel and Soloveitchik devoted the bulk of their efforts to strengthening Judaism in the United States, rather than to deepening the relation of American Jews to Israel. Both thinkers, moreover, articulated the place that the land and state occupy—central and yet peripheral; mythic in focus rather than everyday—in consonance with their larger views about God, Torah, and Jewish peoplehood, the last of these also of course known as Israel. Finally, both fended off the challenge posed by Israel to the personal decision not to live there; not to participate firsthand in the ingathering for which they prayed daily; not to observe the commandments that could only be observed in the land; not to contribute every day and directly to a project that they believed to be somehow in accord with, or even directed by, divine providence.

Jewish religion here not only trumps Zionism, but also contextualizes its claims, thereby limiting them. By legitimating Diaspora Judaism, Heschel and Soloveitchik silence competing Jewish claims which, if heard loud and clear, might well cast doubt on the adequacy or feasibility of Jewish religious life in the United States.

I want to offer some further examples of this same pattern selected from American Jewish religious thought of the last few years—the \textit{Commentary} symposium of 1996\textsuperscript{21} and a sampling of recent volumes by prominent American Jewish religious thinkers.

Contributors to the \textit{Commentary} symposium fall into a number of categories on the subject of Israel. Some did not mention the state at all, despite a question this time around on how the Holocaust and Israel—paired by the editors, as they are often joined in popular consciousness—had influenced faith, religious identity, and observance of the respondents. Others did discuss Israel, but only in the mythic terms of life after death, miracle, hope, "Zion." Israel's function as a proof for divine providence, or of God's renewed presence in history, was mentioned frequently. Only Blu Greenberg, however, declared that Israel was a thrilling miracle that engaged her more than any other Jewish involvement. Few


contributors ascribed importance to Israel in terms of their own Jewish lives without an immediate qualification that returned the emphasis to America. None, of course, advocated *aliyah*. All in all, the *Commentary* symposium gives expression to much love of and pride in Israel, while treating it as a distinctly minor element in terms of theological reflection.

Recent volumes of Jewish religious thought differ in degree but not in kind from the thrust of the *Commentary* symposium. For example, Daniel Gordis, in a popular work on Jewish spirituality, *God Was Not in the Fire*, indicates that he will not be treating the subject of Israel, because his topic does not demand it. In a second volume, this one dealing with contemporary Jewish existence as a whole—*Does the World Need the Jews?*—Gordis does raise the subject of Israel, but only in order to refute the claim that it should occupy center stage in current Jewish life.

Arthur Green, in a work rooted in the Jewish mystical tradition, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name*, deals with Israel briefly in the section on redemption. A new Judaism is being articulated in Israel, Green contends, “one that involves land and language more than it does observance of tradition.” This stress, Green is aware, makes American Jews uncomfortable, but they can profit from it, because Diaspora Jews have become too urbanized and too intellectualized to “take cognizance of divinity in our natural surroundings.”

Judith Plaskow, in *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, builds on the traditional structure of God, Torah, and Israel and focuses on the State of Israel in a chapter entitled “Israel: Toward a New Concept of Community.” The redefinition of the people of Israel, Plaskow argues, necessarily involves consideration of the state, because “the human difficulties in dealing with difference, the social implications of traditional attitudes toward difference, the continuities between the modern Jewish construction of difference and historical Jewish treatment of others all emerge with special vividness in the context of the State of Israel.” Considered in these terms, Plaskow maintains, Israel’s treatment of both the Palestinians and gender inequality in the country needs to be critiqued: “It seems that the Jewish experience of oppression has led not to the just exercise of power by Jews in power, but to the Jewish repetition of strategies of domination.” Plaskow, then, draws a negative lesson from Israel about what Jewish life should be like in the United States.

Two other recent works oriented neither to feminism nor to spirituality do accord Israel more sustained and complicated treatment, though neither moves very far from the themes enunciated in this essay thus far. Irving Greenberg's *The Jewish Way*, organized according to the cycle of the Jewish calendar, ends with a chapter on Israeli Independence Day that carries the title—using the mythic terms with which we are familiar—"Resurrection and Redemption." Greenberg labels Zionism "the new exodus," and sees it, with the help of Soloveitchik's "Hark, My Beloved Knocks," as a providential counterpoint to this century's "Egypt," the Holocaust. "The creation of the state was a deeply human act," Greenberg claims, yet nonetheless "an act of redemption of biblical stature. . . . The Bible insists that the human role in redemption in no way reduces the divine intentionality and responsibility for the outcome of events."

Greenberg is also concerned to underscore the "end of galut (exilic) Judaism" that has occurred by virtue of Israel. The state has placed that power in Jewish hands, thereby transforming Jewish history and Judaism. Thanks to Israel's creation, Jews can now "serve God in the joy of victory," raising the question of exactly how Yom Ha'atzmaut—unquestionably a religious holiday, in Greenberg's eyes—should be celebrated. Greenberg endorses the recitation of Hallel, and includes the marking of Yom Hazikaron, the day before Independence Day, which in Israel is devoted to remembrance of fallen soldiers.

Eugene Borowitz, in *Renewing the Covenant*, relates to Israel in a variety of contexts—perhaps the greatest single innovation in this regard. Not surprisingly, he deals with it in terms of the Holocaust, noting that Israel offers Jews a personal experience of "God's saving power." Borowitz continues: "The State of Israel appeared a model of moral politics; it also became the shining symbol of our people's transpolitical, instinctive, life-affirming answer to Hitler's nihilism, giving it a numinosity, a sacred aura that even a secularized generation could not ignore."

Still, Borowitz stresses that the state cannot be the answer to the quest of American Jews for a "substitute absolute" capable of replacing lost faith in modernity. "Despite all that the State of Israel means to us and has done for us, there is a compelling Jewish and human distinction between its claiming our deep devotion and serving as our actional absolute." Borowitz returns to the subject of Israel in dealing with what he calls "the sparks of chosenness," i.e., the meaning of the covenant linking the Jewish people to God. Israel's existence, Borowitz observes, "has

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intensified the possible effects of our people being chosen," since "a culturally self-determining Jewish community provides the Jewish people corporately with the optimum situation in which to work out its God-oriented destiny." Here too Borowitz adds a qualifier, noting that Diaspora Jews normally have closer contact with Gentiles on a personal level and can thus more easily carry out this particular aspect of Jewish chosenness, once called "mission." 27

Israel figures in one additional context in Borowitz's book, namely in attempting to apply the classical "covenant-ideal" of living as a nation in the world of realpolitik and "within the tensions of survival/sanctification." At the same time, the challenge for Diaspora Jewry, in Borowitz's view, is to determine "what it might mean to be an enfranchised self as a believing Jew." A survey of the prayer books in use by American Jews, conducted by historian David Ellenson, has found that there too, as in the works summarized above, "even when the territoriality of Jewish existence in the state is recalled and the presence of the Jewish people in the Land is acknowledged, the universal elements in the tradition remain highlighted." The state is "refracted specifically through the prism of a universalistic ethos." National memory in the prayers uttered by American Jews is joined to personal spiritual quest, and the "linked myth" of Holocaust and Redemption is repeatedly canonized by the liturgy. "The present-day reality of a secular Israel . . . [is] far removed from the vision of the Jewish state presented in these liturgies. Simply put, the State of Israel embodies a religious, not a secular nationalist, reality for the adherents of these American Jewish religious denominations" [Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist]. 28

Orthodoxy presents a rather complicated picture. Although the prayers uttered in Israeli and American Orthodox synagogues are virtually identical, some differences in religious outlook remain, as expressed in a recent symposium on the subject of Israel in the Orthodox journal Tradition. 29 Wariness continues concerning the messianism evident among many Orthodox Israelis of the younger generation, and Americans are far less comfortable than their Israeli counterparts with legislation imposing Orthodox control of marriage, divorce, and conversion. Finally, opinions differ among modern Orthodox Jews in America regarding the

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recitation of Hallel on Israeli Independence Day—a practice not only universal among modern Orthodox Jews in Israel, but a strong marker of identity that distinguishes them from traditionalist Orthodox Jews unwilling to accord the state this mark of Jewish legitimacy.

The non-Orthodox American Jewish thinkers surveyed above, and the rabbis who compose the prayer books in use by non-Orthodox American Jews, are in one crucial respect similar to the handful of Jewishly knowledgeable and committed writers of fiction who of late have created a spate of exceptions to Rosenfeld’s generalization about non-interest in Israel. All are subject to the need for self-justification vis à vis the existential claims that Israel makes, the need for a cogent response to Israeli challengers who argue that American Jews too will in the end succumb to the forces of assimilation and/or anti-Semitism, that authentic Jewish life and creativity are possible only in Israel, that for Jews who care deeply about being Jewish there is really only one place in the world to live. Consider the remarkable series of Israeli characters, and dialogues on Israeli and Israel-Diaspora themes, in Philip Roth’s recent novels *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*. Even if the rabbis, theologians, and fiction writers are not, like all of Roth’s personae, avowedly secular, and even if they are not, like the Roth double in *Shylock*, avowed “diasporists,” American thinkers nonetheless have to answer the difficult question that Roth’s characters seem compelled time after time to answer: How can American Jews not want to live in the Jewish state?

“One can play a role in history without its having to be obvious,” Nathan tells his brother Henry, newly relocated to a Gush Emunim settlement on the West Bank. “It may be that flourishing mundanely in the civility and security of South Orange, more or less forgetful from one day to the next of your Jewish origins but remaining identifiably (and voluntarily) a Jew, you were making Jewish history no less astonishing than theirs, though without quite knowing it every moment, and without having to say it.” If one can flourish transcendentally in South Orange, thanks to the Jewish religious tradition; if one does remember Jewish origins in prayer, communal activity, study, and ritual; if one thereby remains not only identifiably Jewish, but substantively so—the claim to be making Jewish history, and the knowledge that one is doing so, come still more easily.

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The acknowledgement of the claims of Israel and the decision not to live there underscore yet again the combination of relationship and distancing at the heart of the American Jewish response to Israel.

The Claims of the Center

Having brought the argument this far, I wish to speak in more personal terms as an American Jew who has made aliya, and returned from aliya, and has written books and essays about Jewish thought in which the subject of Israel is rarely in the foreground for very long.

I remember wondering more than once as a teenager, and actually asking the question aloud one Friday evening at an oneg shabbat at my synagogue, why all those American Jews who cared about being Jewish had not long since moved to Israel. There seemed to be so much life there, so much sheer vitality, whereas most of American Judaism seemed confined to the doldrums of synagogue and Hebrew school and the petty concerns of organizational life. When my wife and I made aliya, it was, I think, the fullness of Jewish life possible in Israel that attracted us more than anything else. In Israel life was rich, with the most mundane activities bound up in the most transcendent of human projects. We did not leave the United States because of any disappointment with this country, or any experience of anti-Semitism, or any conviction that America was not as much a home as human beings can know on this earth. And we did not come back to the United States for any but personal reasons. There was no disappointment with Israel, no sense that the promised land had failed to live up to any of its promises, no exchange of Zionist commitments for "diasporism."

And yet, for all that, if one chooses to live in the United States rather than in Israel, one imagines Jewish life primarily in terms that can be put into practice here. An ethic of aspiration, even if it remains an ideal far beyond one’s grasp, must nonetheless be close enough to stimulate aspiration, not so far removed as to preclude reaching for it. The Torah that holds American Jews, in all their varieties of Jewish commitment, is a Torah that can be lived where they live. What is more, that Torah, because it calls upon Jews to transform all human projects everywhere in accordance with the will of God, will almost inevitably trump Israel’s centrality for Jewish existence. Judaism itself thus removes Israel from the foreground most of the time, just as "Israel" in its classic sense—the Jewish people as a whole—always encompasses, and so limits, the claims of Israel as land or state. This is so despite the fact that many of the most important Jewish realizations for the minority of American Jews who are deeply involved with the Jewish state occur in Israel and because of Israel. Let me enumerate a few of these realizations, which I
believe are widespread among committed American Jews of this generation.\textsuperscript{32}

Consider the experience of Jewish peoplehood that comes, for example, when riding an Egged bus. The physiognomies of those on board are many and various, and yet we know immediately that they belong to the same "family." We recognize that all have come from far away to be in this place, the only place on earth where we could meet them all, and meet them on what is for all home turf. The sense of shared peoplehood is increased when we reflect on the gratitude felt for the soldiers riding on the bus. Their guns protect us from people who consider us enemies simply because of who and what we are. "Us" and "them" come clearly into view. A similar realization may stem from turning the dial on the radio late at night and hearing only Arabic, except for the Voice of America, the BBC, and the station of the Israeli Defense Forces. These lessons of "us" and "them" are difficult for young American Jews, heirs to Vietnam-era antipathy toward military force and skeptical of cold-war rhetoric about the enemy. One often does not want to know that history is inescapable. The realization alters politics and confirms identity.

Like many other American Jews, I became convinced of the centrality of Israel in contemporary Jewish life not from paying attention to the innumerable debates on the subject but by sitting in Jerusalem—specifically, in my case, at the Cinemateque during a showing of \textit{Because of That War}, a film about and starring two young Israeli rock musicians, both the children of Holocaust survivors. When the lights went up after the film that day, disputes on the issue of centrality suddenly seemed academic. It was clear that Israel represents the principal continuation of Jewish history in this century and into the future. For all that American Jews too have the potential to write a major chapter in the history of the Jewish people, Israel is the place where the fate of the Jews stands most exposed to view and is most on the line. One is grateful to know Hebrew at such moments, because it makes possible the direct absorption of lessons such as this one without the need for subtitles, and enables one to discuss it in the language which, like the Jewish people, is alive again, thanks to Israel. This is a source of much pleasure, as is physical contact with the land of Israel: the natural features such as wadis and hills, and the layers upon layers of history still visible on the surface of the land or recently excavated from beneath it.

One also learns important things about God and Torah in Israel. Pil-

\footnote{For more on these matters, see my book \textit{Taking Hold of Torah: Jewish Commitment and Community in America} (Bloomington, 1997).}
grimage becomes vivid on a Shavuot morning in Jerusalem when, after participating in an all-night study session, we join the throngs streaming from every direction toward the common center, the Western Wall. There and elsewhere in Israel the appeal of sacred space becomes compelling, as the spell of sacred time is sensed in the stillness of the streets on Yom Kippur. One learns what it means to testify with one’s feet and to live by a calendar that moves to Jewish rather than Gentile rhythms.

Prophecy too can come into fuller view, and not only because a scroll of Isaiah discovered at Qumran is on permanent exhibit at the Shrine of the Book. Sitting near the Wall or on the Temple Mount, looking out at the same expanse of desert that filled Isaiah’s vision, it becomes easier to understand the prophet’s conviction that human beings are all caught between the sky above and the rock beneath, dazzled and overwhelmed by the light. We reside in a place where everything matters, subject to a responsibility from which there is no escape. Indeed, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory.”

In Israel everything does seem to matter, all the time, to the point that one wishes for some levity, and is all the more disappointed when it comes from debates in the Knesset. History matters and is of ultimate importance. Perspective, for better and for worse, seems to vanish at times, as foreign and domestic policy issues of the moment are debated in terms of a tradition that is centuries old.

Nor is Torah any longer confined to the prophetic critique of power delivered from the sidelines. Judaism in Israel must now engage power, because Israelis wield power, the situation mandating an interplay of state and religion that is unnerving to American Jews, whose ability to be Jews rests on a constitutional separation between state and religion. The political disputes recounted in the biblical books of Numbers or Kings take on new significance as one observes the analogous struggles of contemporary Israelis to fuse the age-old claims of covenant with the pressing demands of political reality. It is no wonder that the Israeli civil religion seeks to confer the sanctity of divine covenant upon political decisions that now, as in the Bible, are the subject of great controversy. Nor is it a surprise when God and Torah are invoked by religious Israelis to justify beliefs or behavior that other Israelis find reprehensible, likewise because of God and Torah.

All of this proves perplexing to American Jews upon first encounter, and for many it remains troubling no matter how well they come to know Israel. Yet, power is not inimical to virtue, a point that Emil Fackenheim,
Irving Greenberg, and other Jewish religious thinkers in North America have emphasized against the background of Israel's existence. Indeed, power makes many good deeds possible and prevents some bad deeds that stem from the desperation of powerlessness. The many fine uses of Jewish power in Israel these past five decades prove this. But it is also true—as Isaiah Leibowitz, David Hartman, and other Israeli thinkers have stressed—that power puts ethical and religious ideals to the test, and that Jews, like others, do not always pass, whether in their relations to the Palestinians or to one another. Hence the recent critiques of Zionism ventured in the name of Jewish or Zionist ideals. That seems an inevitable consequence of the Zionist dream and the achievement of “normalization,” at times on view far more than either Israelis or American Jews would wish. Jewish living in Israel is unshielded by the minority status and relative powerlessness of Diaspora Jewish life, where the moral refuge of standing on the sidelines is always available and often made use of.

These are some of the palpable meanings that Israel carries for those privileged not only to be alive at a time when the state exists, but also to know its reality close up. And this is to say nothing of the mythic aspects of Israel, which remain as potent as ever. One cannot walk the streets of Israeli cities, see the faces of Ethiopian immigrants, hear Russian all around, and not marvel at the “ingathering of the exiles,” an exhilarating example of a prayer that has actually come true. Moreover, the Zionist account of modern Jewish history—particularly as amended in recent years to take account of Diaspora achievement on the one hand and Zionist or Israeli failings on the other—is far more persuasive than Diaspora versions that minimize the extent of anti-Semitism or the threat of assimilation.

American Jews, for all that they benefit from living with what is distinctive to the 20th-century United States, do seem subject to the same “rules” that have governed all of modern Jewish history. We too negotiate loyalties, depend on shifting coalitions of interests, know the fragility of our success. The Israelis are right to insist on this, even as we are right

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34 See Emil Fackenheim, To Mend the World (New York, 1982), and The Jewish Thought of Emil Fackenheim, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Detroit, 1987). See also Greenberg, The Jewish Way, chap. 11.
to remind them that a tiny state located where Israel is located is not exactly in the best position to claim that it has secured the future of the Jewish people. Nor are Israelis, for all the advantages of public Jewish time and space and immediate access to Hebrew, entitled to the prideful boast that they, unlike us, have secured the future of Judaism.

The Jewries of the United States and Israel, then, however one stands on the contested issue of the true Jewish center(s), and for all the differences between the two communities that I have enumerated, seem in this sense at least to be on parallel tracks. Israel represents one of the two options for Jewish survival and Jewish thriving that have proven viable in the modern world—life inside a sovereign state protected by its army. The United States represents the most promising case yet of the other option—minority existence in a Diaspora democracy, in which Jews take the risk that they can maintain the economic and political clout necessary to guarantee their rights and can secure the resources needed to maintain and transmit the Jewish way of life. Both Jewries seek, in language that we have used repeatedly in this essay, to marry normalcy and covenant—to meet the needs of survival, the demands of the everyday, as well as the demands of the highest values that Jews know: God and Torah.

These basic facts of the modern Jewish situation are unlikely to change in the next half-century, even as Israel quickly overtakes the United States in its Jewish population and eventually contains the majority of the world’s Jews. Shared Jewish interests, then, regardless of principles that may or may not be shared, would seem to require that Jews in Israel and the United States be open to the lessons that each bears for the other, as well as the challenges that each poses to the other. These fall into two categories.

It has long since become a commonplace that Israel and Diaspora require each other for their physical survival, and that the Jewish people, for its survival, requires both. Israelis are obviously dependent on U.S. governmental assistance, and this in turn depends in part on the support of a united American Jewry. However, American Jews likewise benefit in a host of ways from Israel, albeit intangibly. Dignity and self-respect—and so achievement—are bound up, to a degree we cannot and should not wish to test, in the existence of a sovereign and successful Jewish state. This dependence is implicitly acknowledged, I believe, in the anxiety that Israel always live up to the highest moral ideals and never get far out of sync with the policies of the U.S. government. American Jews naturally want Israel to help them feel good about being Jews. Interests and principles, normalcy and covenant, work together in this respect.

The interdependence of the two Jewries in the cultural and religious spheres is less widely acknowledged, but is, in my view, no less serious.
Jewish thought here and there, for all its differences, is nourished by the same sources, classical and modern, and developments in both countries sooner or later have an impact on the other. Experiences in Israel such as those I pointed to play a crucial role in the Jewish journeys of many of the most committed American Jews. The myth of Israel continues to help secure the identification of those less committed. Jewish artists and scholars in the two societies are utterly interdependent; American synagogues, their liturgies barely altered by Israel’s existence, have been greatly enlivened through music imported from Israel, as American homes and ritual observances have been beautified by imported art objects. Israelis for their part have not only been significantly affected by American popular culture that in turn bears the imprint of American Jewish experiences, but are increasingly feeling the impact of developments, whether feminist or Orthodox or “new age” or Conservative or Reform, that first took place and took root in the United States. This cross-fertilization too is likely to continue, regardless of population shifts, and will likely grow among the minority in each country that cares deeply about Jewish peoplehood and tradition.

It seems pointless to me to argue any longer, as Jews have often argued over the past five decades, over whether Israel deserves to be considered the political center of the Jewish people, or whether it has earned the right, culturally or morally, to be considered the spiritual center. Nor, I think, should Jews here or there any longer insist on the word “Zionist” to describe activities better and more simply designated as Israeli or Jewish, whether these be organizational, economic, or educational. Complete fulfillment of the tasks set for political Zionism by Herzl and other founders—the ingathering of all the world’s Jews to Palestine, with a resultant end to anti-Semitism—must await the coming of the messiah, just as Ahad Ha’am said a century ago. Complete fulfillment of the tasks set by Ahad Ha’am and other spiritual Zionists—the renaissance of Jewish culture throughout the world—must likewise await the messiah. In the meantime, Israel need not be the “light unto the nations” to be worthy of American Jewish interest, but only what it is: a thriving Jewish society where various visions of Jewish life jostle with each other and compete for the allegiance of Israelis, in ways that are directly relevant to Jews in the Diaspora. Israel’s pursuit of normalcy should concern American Jews as much as its pursuit of covenant. I assume that efforts to reach a settlement with the Palestinians will remain a source of concern on both counts—and should constitute added reason for involvement in Israel by American Jews, rather than for disengagement from it.

For reasons that should by now be apparent, I do not expect the two communities as a whole to turn toward one another in the next 50 years of Israel’s existence. Most American Jews will continue to rely on myth,
while keeping the reality of Israel at a safe distance. The Israeli government will often assist them by its actions, as will proponents of one or another form of Judaism not shaped by the very different conditions of America and so not receptive to the reigning American pluralism. What is written about Israel and Zionism, here or there, will have a lot less effect on how American Jews perceive and relate to Israel than the facts of what Israelis make of their country in coming years. Efforts toward peace, just treatment of Israel's minorities, and acceptance of differing forms of Judaism will yield positive outcomes.

That is not to say, however, that organized Jewry could not do more to bridge the gap between the two Jewish populations. On the contrary, it could with not much effort expand the set of joint projects already under way, for which I would henceforth reserve the term "Zionism." Aliyah, and the knowledge of Israel that is the prerequisite to aliyah, will of course remain a part of this continuing Zionism, though emigration to Israel from the Western Diaspora will probably remain at low levels. The emphasis, however, will likely fall on projects through which thousands of American Jews can get to know Israel and Israelis more intimately, and vice versa. Money has already begun to flow through investments and hands-on involvement rather than merely via philanthropy. Information and ideas are flowing not only through books but through television and the Internet.

Visits to Israel, and not only by young people, are more and more devoted to meeting ordinary Israelis and getting to know Israeli society in all its complexity, rather than taking the form of "missions" focused on meetings with government officials and confronting only the Israel packet so as to maximize excitement and donations. Hebrew literacy, currently possessed by very few American Jews, would certainly increase access to Israeli reality as well as to the classical sources of Jewish tradition. Most important of all, perhaps, are projects such as "Partnership 2000," an initiative sponsored by the Jewish Agency, which joins local Jewish communities in the United States with specific cities and towns in Israel and puts the Jews of those communities to work, in partnership, on tasks of education and development both in Israel and in the Diaspora. The program has recently been expanded to include study groups that link American Jews and Israelis in the common exploration of Jewish history and tradition. All of these activities make each of the parallel tracks more vivid to the other and are likely to have an impact on the pursuit of both normalcy and covenant.

Heschel, then, was not wrong: Israel is a place of "great sacred deeds" in which American Jews can join, even if, as a living Jewish state, it is also a place of much profane reality. Nor was Kaplan wrong: Israel has helped to assure a "place for diaspora Judaism" in America, a Diaspora which,
for all its failings, represents an achievement undreamed-of when Israel was born half a century ago. One shudders to think what American Jewish life would be like in the absence of Israel. Grateful for the immensity of what has been and what is, one looks forward to the next 50 years with enormous expectancy—and no small measure of hope.