

# Field of Dreams and Reality

## Toward a Balanced Zionist Vision

***Great expectations of Israeli perfection inevitably lead to disappointment. Healthy Zionism means knowing how to pursue our grandest dreams while struggling with their complicated consequences***

Healthy nations, like healthy individuals, have dreams, ambitions, defining ideals. Democracies are dream factories, where the “ought” – the model society we hope for – inspires individual and collective achievements. In the United States, the “American Dream” shapes personal ambitions, while noble principles such as liberty, democracy, justice, and equality shape America’s greatest communal accomplishments. These collective aspirations create the high standards by which the world judges any democracy’s behavior, and by which citizens in a democracy should judge themselves. They also steer democracy’s self-corrective mechanisms, its remarkable capacity for peaceful reform.

{ By **GIL TROY**

All governments and societies are imperfect and must balance national ideals with difficult realities, the “ought” and the “is.” Achieving equilibrium often proves particularly vexing when it comes to Israel. Both the expectations people have of the country and the problems facing it seem overwhelming. Today, at their most extreme, many supporters of Israel are so dazzled by the idea of a Jewish State that they only judge Israel by the “ought,” its noblest dreams, failing to admit any faults in the “is.” Alternatively, extreme critics only judge Israel by the “ought” of artificially high standards that no state under attack can achieve, forgetting then to acknowledge any good that there “is.”

## A renewed Zionism requires a recalibration between the “ought” and the “is.”

Usually, among most Jews, the dialogue about Israel is more nuanced. But contemplating the extremes can encourage thinking about a more tempered discussion, exploring how Israel as it is and how Israel as it ought to be can form the basis for a healthier engagement with Israel. Even if Israel’s high ideals court great disappointment or invite unfair criticism, Israel must keep striving, as both a Jewish state and a Western democracy. Israel should remain engaged with the “ought” – the country it hopes to become – in order to improve the “is,” the country it currently appears to be. A renewed Zionism based on a mutually satisfying relationship between diaspora Jews and Israel requires a recalibration between the “ought” and “is.”

## Creative Dissatisfaction

The State of Israel was conceived by a playwright, Theodor Herzl, who coined the slogan: “If you will it, it is no dream,” and set into motion the political process that culminated in 1948. Israel

is not just an *Altneuland* – an old land renewed – but a dream-come-true land. The Jewish return to the Promised Land, after nearly 2000 years of yearning, in the form of a functioning state committed to traditionally Jewish and modern democratic ideals, was one of the twentieth century’s great redemptive stories. And the founding of Israel, imbued with the idealism of the *halutz* and the *kibbutz*, the pioneer and the communal farm, cast the Jewish state as a model nation for the world.

As a people, too, Jews are addicted to the “ought.” Our Torah offers practical pathways toward creating an ideal world. Our foundational texts speak of pursuing justice, treating neighbors graciously, honoring strangers. Our national anthem is “Hatikvah,” the hope. We end every Seder with the aspiration “next year in Jerusalem,” thinking perhaps of aliyah, or at least of a renewed Jerusalem, be it a rebuilt capital in the Middle East, a celestial city, or even a new Middle East entirely. The cycle, repeated again and again throughout Jewish history, of facing oppression and then being redeemed – or at least surviving – demanded a capacity to reach for the “ought,” dreaming about a better world, while coping with the “is,” no matter how ugly the actual world was at a given point in time.

As Jews, we are constantly searching for how we and our homeland can stretch, can improve. The search creates a culture of intense criticism, passionate arguments, and, sometimes, deep disappointment. But it also cultivates a politics of high ideals, magnificent aspirations, and great achievements. We have seen Jewish refugees from the Holocaust, Arab lands, the crumbling Soviet Union, distressed Ethiopia become productive citizens of a sovereign state. We have seen peace treaties signed, technologies developed, economic benchmarks surpassed, which the experts never thought would happen. We have seen Jewish values applied creatively to modern situations.

Jews have forged a modern democracy rooted in the ancestral homeland, whose citizens live by the Jewish calendar. Israelis

have synthesized Western law with Jewish law, revived the Hebrew language, and pioneered a dynamic new Israeli culture. Israel has shared agricultural and medical technologies with Third World countries. We as a people have not only survived amid difficult conditions, we have thrived. Without an addiction to the “ought,” a constant search to improve individually and collectively, our “is” would not be as good as the “is” is today.

In building a Zionism for the twenty-first century, Jews should take this “ought” talk more personally. Belonging to a people, a nation, helps individuals envision the future and change the present by mobilizing communal resources and sharing skills. In Israel and the Diaspora, many Jews use this “peoplehood platform” to fix the world, to be a vehicle for fulfilling personal and communal ideals. We can see Jewish idealism in the ways Jews lead philanthropically, in Israel and the Diaspora, giving money to a variety of causes, “Jewish” and “secular.” In May 2006, at the Save Darfur rally in Washington, DC, Jewish students, wearing Jewish organizational T-shirts while demonstrating for oppressed Sudanese, showed they understood how to advance universal ideals through Jewish values and affiliations. Likewise, in March, 2011, Israelis helped stricken Japanese earthquake and Tsunami victims through IsraAID’s skilled search-and-rescue teams. These young Israeli army veterans also proved they could help humanity via their national identity.

As Israel’s president, Shimon Peres has eloquently invoked national ideals in ways that none of the recent, pedestrian prime ministers have. Peres frequently celebrates Jews’ “dissatisfaction gene.” He calls it “the greatest thing about Judaism,” explaining that “a Jewish person cannot be satisfied . . . The minute he is satisfied he begins to be non-Jewish. Dissatisfaction is the source of creation. All the time, because we were oppressed, we were small, we couldn’t sit down and have a glass of wine.”

Ultimately, the Zionism we must develop today is an aspirational Zionism. The generation of our parents and grandparents helped found the state. The task of Israeli or Diaspora Zionists, is to correct its problems and fulfill its many ideals. We need to continue to see – in utilitarian terms – Zionism as a useful vehicle. This struggle to improve the Jewish state enlists Jewish individuals as active players in a grand enterprise. And, if we succeed, not only will we find individual fulfillment, improve Israel’s quality of life, make Israel a model nation, and use our Zionist platform to help humanity, we will also redeem the ideals of nationalism and religion. If we can show that creating a democratic Jewish state is not a futile quest to resolve an incompatible contradiction but rather an opportunity to apply values from our rich religious tradition while expressing our deep national spirit, we can teach the world – and ourselves – a valuable lesson.

## **Luftmensen No More**

It will not be easy. Too many Westerners today, some Jews included, have bought into a faux cosmopolitanism, caricaturing both nationalism and religion as xenophobic. And too many Westerners today, including an increasingly vocal minority of Jews, only see Zionism as xenophobic rather than temperate or constructive. Jews who have a stake in Israel, however, have an opportunity – and a responsibility – to show that nationalism can mobilize collective power for good and not just polarize. We have to prove that our religion can root us in the quest for universal justice, not just derail us into superstition and self-absorption. In fact, our rich Jewish tradition, brought to life in a thriving, modern, democratic nation-state, can be a framework for finding individual meaning and achieving universal good for the world.

This constant quest to improve the Jewish homeland creates a culture of high ideals and grand aspirations while risking a politics of



Ethiopian Jews en route to Israel during Operation Solomon, 1991. Photo by Nathan Alpert.



harsh criticism and intense disappointment. Overemphasizing the “ought” can backfire. If expectations about the Jewish state are too high, there is a risk of forgetting that governments are imperfect vehicles, run by imperfect people making tough decisions. In such a situation, many outsiders make their support for the state contingent on its fulfillment of some ideal, rather than its inherent right to exist.

## The Zionist Beauty Myth creates artificially high expectations about what the Jewish State should be.

We must be clear in our thinking, especially at a moment when various international forces are aiming to delegitimize Israel, assailing Israel’s very right to exist. We should never invoke the “ought” to justify Israel’s existence out of some sense of virtue as defined by others, but should instead feel challenged and inspired to embrace the aspirations of the Jewish Zionist mission. Israel does not beg the world for the right to exist because we Jews claim to be uniquely noble. We do not accept our national rights on probation, contingent on good behavior. In viewing the “ought” not as a question of legitimacy but of destiny, not as a question of Israel’s right to exist but of what to do with that right, we can enjoy the great opportunities liberal nationalism and Zionism afford. Becoming a “Start-Up Nation” was not necessary to justify Israel’s existence, but being a “Start-Up Nation” is one of many ways the world benefits from the fulfillment of Zionism.

Many American Jews take this sort of mission in America for granted. It is rare to see any Americans use America’s failure to create a perfect “New Order of the Ages” – in Latin, *Novus ordo seclorum*, the words that appear on the one-dollar bill – as proof that the United States should not exist or is illegitimate. It has been argued that Israel suffers from

a variation of “The Beauty Myth.” Just as feminist author Naomi Wolf warned that the constant images of supposedly perfect models make many women feel perpetually inadequate, the Zionist Beauty Myth creates artificially high expectations about what the Jewish State should be. It’s a recipe for disappointment and even repudiation.

Alternatively, focusing exclusively on the “ought,” always seeing Israel or any country as a work in progress, also risks deferring judgments so far into the future that we avoid important issues in the “is.” When you have a sovereign government, good intentions and big dreams are not enough. Results count. For example, Israel has been a world leader in articulating a doctrine of “*Tohar HaNeshek*,” “the purity of arms.” In teaching soldiers in a democracy under attack how to defend themselves while preserving their souls, to fight hard without losing their moral compass, Israel’s guidelines often exceed world norms. Writing in the *New Republic* in the aftermath of the 2009 Gaza war, the Israeli philosopher Moshe Halbertal noted that unlike international law, Israel’s military code demands that “soldiers assume some risk to their own lives in order to avoid causing the deaths of civilians.” But simply having a nicely developed idea is not enough – it must be implemented on the battlefield.

## Israel has been a world leader in articulating a doctrine of “the purity of arms.”

Zionism brought Jews back to history. Returning to real time, to political power, meant no longer being free-floating *Luftmenschen*, living in the “maybe” – it meant taking responsibility, confronting reality. Beyond that, classical Zionist thought is ambivalent on this question of what the character of the state should be. Theodor Herzl is best known for seeking normalcy. The famous story of his founding the Zionist movement in reaction to

the Dreyfus affair, when waves of anti-Semitism cascaded through “enlightened” France, emphasizes a defensive quest to establish a state like all states, so that Jews could be like all other peoples.

But that narrative misses the liberal idealism that shaped European – and American – nationalism in the 1800s. Herzl himself was not just a defensive Zionist, he saw the great creativity and social good that national fulfillment could accomplish. As he wrote in his famous tract *Der Judenstaat* (“*The Jewish State*”), in 1896: “We shall live at last as free men on our own soil, and in our own homes peacefully die. The world will be liberated by our freedom, enriched by our wealth, magnified by our greatness. And whatever we attempt there for our own benefit will redound mightily and beneficially to the good of all mankind.” This kind of utopianism informed much of the Zionist conversation among the many different schools of Zionist thought established in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Clearly, the Jewish idea of “normal life” remained – and remains – wrapped up in getting as close as possible to creating a heaven on earth in one’s personal and collective lives.

Therefore, Israel should not stifle difficult conversations, or postpone needed reforms, even if it is an embattled state facing ugly situations while ennobled by lovely dreams. Zionism rebelled against waiting for the Messiah. The “ought” must be a daily spur to judge the “is” and make it better, not a ticket to perpetual absolution. Israel’s Declaration of Independence promised that the Jewish State “will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.” Those are impressive aspirations, especially considering that they were made with five Arab armies and Palestinian irregulars attacking as the state was declared in May 1948. But Israel must deliver. It can only solve the conceptual conundrum – can a state be Jewish and democratic? – with what Israelis

call “facts on the ground.” We cannot wait for peace – we cannot hide behind Palestinian enmity – to justify failure in this realm. If Arab citizens enjoyed full political rights in Israel, in a climate of zero-tolerance for discrimination, with equally good and well-financed schools and infrastructure, Israel’s standing with its Arab neighbors and the world probably would improve – as would, even more important, Israel’s own sense of national virtue.

## Toward a Values Nation

Every day in Israel, the “is” and the “ought” collide, or else two “oughts” seem to be clashing. Many of Israel’s defining ideals are in tension with one another; Israel’s leaders often seem to be making difficult choices balancing one pressing need against the next. Some of these are unique to Israel’s character, such as the tension between being a Jewish state or a democratic state. Some of these are typical of modern democracies, such as the tension between private property and social welfare, or between national security and civil liberties. Israel’s peculiar positioning in a violent neighborhood makes the choices harder, as Israelis seek peace and self-preservation, or want to welcome persecuted refugees but fear the Jewish majority being engulfed by refugees from the Sudan.

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Contrary to the polarized rhetoric in the Knesset and in the media, we should distinguish between seeing what the Israeli scholars Alexander Yakobson and Amnon Rubinstein, in their book *Israel and the Family of Nations* (2008), call “a tension between two legitimate values” and alleging “a fundamental incompatibility.” Acknowledging the tension



between Zionism's civic and ethnic impulses, between Israel's aspirations to express the will of the majority and protect the full political rights of the minority, is not the same as claiming these are contradictions. Just as there are tensions between liberty and equality – but North Americans do not choose one to the exclusion of the other – “the Jewish and democratic character of the state can create tensions and practical dilemmas,” Yakobson and Rubinstein explain, without compelling a false choice between one or the other. They argue that valuing minority rights over the majority's choice – exclusively – would be “denying the right of the Jewish people to national independence. This denial is in itself an assault on the principle of equality.”

To govern – and to vote – is to choose. When two “oughts” collide, neither leaders nor citizens can simply delight in argument and disputation for their own sake – a Jewish pastime since antiquity – or call out “*teiku*,” the Talmudic acronym that means “stalemate.” The moderate is more willing than the partisan to acknowledge the validity of different positions, but true, effective, muscular moderation still entails choosing one principle over another when necessary. For example, many Modern Orthodox Jews are prepared to defend the belief that when democratic values and traditional halachic law clash, democratic values should prevail. (Please note the language: this is not “democracy” versus “Judaism,” because democracy is a Jewish value too.) Similarly, many such Jews favor life over land, and are ready to compromise on Jews' historic claims to some parts of the land of Israel in the pursuit of a true peace.

No formula can resolve the tension between yearning for the “ought” and confronting the “is.” Israel's noble aspirations should not be used to sidestep difficult questions about its ugliest faults; but Israel's faults should not be used to ignore equally important discussions about its achievements and aspirations. With apologies to Hillel, if we don't deal with the realities, and sometimes compromise, who are

we? If we remain mired in reality and don't stretch, what are we?

Ultimately, however, a meaningful twenty-first century Zionism must be aspirational. Pragmatism is not enough. Israel cannot just be the embattled state, nor should it only settle for being the Start-Up Nation. In helping make Israel become a “Values Nation,” Zionism will build on that ambition-feeding dissatisfaction that Shimon Peres calls uniquely Jewish, and it will seek to give gifts to humanity, as Herzl dreamed. But even if we falter, in trying to save the world we save our souls. If the Jewish community can replace a growing culture of corrosive, selfish, and passive cynicism with an uplifting, communitarian, and altruistic Zionism, we will help re-orient Israel for the better.

In returning Zionism to our communal field of dreams, instead of limiting our horizons to the toughest problems, we also have the opportunity to welcome a wider range of voices into the Zionist conversation. Engaging Jews around the world in a debate about why we need a Jewish State in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – and just what that state should be like – is more inviting for them than old-fashioned recruitment, the call to salute the Israeli government's policies in combating anti-Israel forces. Dreaming about Israel as a Values Nation – and planning how to get there – moves beyond defending Israel the embattled state, creating the foundation for a deeper, more satisfying relationship. In short, reinvigorating the conversation about what Israel “ought” to be, can bring more people in for a look at what Israel “is” and how it can grow, trusting the Jewish people's marvelous redemptive resilience and every healthy, functional democracy's self-renewing, self-correcting reform impulse.



Cover of *Tagar* (“Challenge”), the journal of the Revisionist Betar movement in Shanghai, 1946. Courtesy of the Jabotinsky Institute.



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