Beyond Survival

Jewish Values and Aspirational Zionism

The Jewish conversation about Israel has focused primarily on protecting the State we need. As a result, we have neglected the task of imagining the society we want

For many years now, the conversation about Israel in the Jewish world has taken a familiar form. With rare exceptions, our sovereign project is spoken of in Jewish communities across the globe with pride about the past and anxiety about the future.

By **TAL BECKER**

At formal gatherings, visiting Israeli speakers are invariably introduced with some reference to the fact that "Israel faces grave new dangers" or the "greatest challenges in its history." They are expected to address the threats confronting the Jewish state and respond to audience questions that spread across a familiar spectrum ranging from concern about Israel's policies to concern about its public relations.

As one of those speakers, I am often struck by how a discussion about Israel can draw Jews together in so many different and distant communities around the globe. There is something inspiring in knowing that Israel is not alone in facing adversity and that Israel's fate still stirs deep emotions in Jewish hearts.

And yet, there is also something deeply disappointing about a conversation that is so crisis-centered; something disquieting about the extensive focus on how to protect and defend Jewish survival, rather than on how to imagine and advance a sovereign Jewish society.

This crisis-based mode of talking about Israel retains pride of place among the many Jews deeply attached to Israel's future as a sovereign Jewish State but worried about the trajectory the country is on. These Jews may differ greatly, and argue vociferously, about how to respond to Israel's crises, but it is the sense of peril that animates their passions. Nowhere is this kind of discourse more evident than on issues of peace and security. Territorial compromise with the Palestinians, for example, is for some Jews a national imperative and for others national suicide, but each position is invariably cast in terms of the threats we face. We are warned of "demographic threats" and international isolation if we do not withdraw from the territories; of security threats and a violent rupture of Israeli society if we do. In either case, it is the threat to Jewish survival that is summoned as the decisive argument and that plays into the wellworn patterns of our national discourse.

The Roots of Anxiety

The roots of this threat-based conversation about Israel are deep and multifaceted. The first, and perhaps most important, is that the crises facing Israel – from a nuclear Iran to terrorism to delegitimization (the list continues) – are real. Though sometimes exaggerated, these crises are not imagined. It is irresponsible to belittle them and entirely legitimate to pay serious attention to how to confront them.

It is understandable that many Jews – certainly in Israel – feel that we are still at the stage of protecting what we have and cannot yet indulge in the "luxury" of thinking beyond the dangers we face. Survival is our first responsibility. And so, we continue living on a knife's edge, ever alert to existential threats, and pushing off questions of national identity and purpose to quieter and less dangerous times.

A second, deeper, undercurrent of the crisis narrative is found in Jewish tradition and experience. Our history as a people is so riddled with persecution and existential anxiety that the relative success and safety we enjoy today does not easily displace it – at least among older generations. Israel remains for many of us the "Jew among the nations": isolated, wary and vulnerable. Israel may be the "beginning of the redemption," but until that redemption comes in full and prophetic form, every achievement is seen through the lens of Jewish history as fragile and reversible.

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In this respect, as much as some of the earlier Zionists imagined the emergence of the "new Jew," the discourse about Israel remains dominated by the old one. We have soldiers to

Noam Shalit, father of abducted soldier Gilad Shalit, with Israeli President Shimon Peres, Jerusalem 2011. Photo by Tomer Appelbaum.

be proud of and a society that is innovative and vibrant, but we carry the anxiety about our place in the world and our survival not unlike the archetypal Jews of Exile.

Yes, we have power now, when in the past we were powerless. We can take pride in our capacity to defend ourselves. But in our national consciousness, the sense that we are a fortress under siege remains palpable, and even the way we use our power, and speak about its use, seems to reflect this self-perception. We do not tend to broadcast confidence in our future or control over our destiny, and even the vocabulary of our leaders is filled with talk of existential threats and impending peril. Israel may have cured the Jewish people of its statelessness, but not yet of the state of mind with which statelessness is associated.

This is all to say that in many ways we are still a traumatized people, and this does much to explain why the politics and language of fear resonate in Israeli and Jewish society. The scars of the Holocaust remain deep and will take generations to heal. Even if Israel's enemies were not providing present threats, the ghosts of past threats would – at least for many of us – be enough to shape much of our mind-set and pre-occupation with potential danger.

This sense of national vulnerability influences the third factor that seems to

drive the focus on crisis: the model of Zionism that underpinned Israel's establishment and continues to shape the national psyche. The political Zionism of Pinsker and Herzl, of Nordau and Ben Gurion (among many others), was richer and more nuanced than is often appreciated, but its primary goal was to establish Israel as a place of refuge for the Jewish people.

Unable to live "normal lives" in the Diaspora, the political Zionists' core aspiration was to form a sovereign Jewish state in which it would be finally possible for the Jewish people to be free to live as all other nations. As Leo Pinsker put it in his early Zionist work of 1882, "Auto-Emancipation":

> The essence of the problem, as we see it, lies in the fact that, in the midst of the nations among whom the Jews reside, they form a distinctive element which cannot be assimilated, which cannot be readily digested by any nation. Hence the problem is to find means of so adjusting the relations of this exclusive element to the whole body of nations that there shall never be any further basis for the Jewish question.

This yearning for a "normal", accepted, sovereign existence naturally places attention on the obstacles to its attainment. If this is Israel's aspiration, then it is the specter of the "nation that dwells alone," of a state in perpetual conflict, that must be overcome. In his first address to the Knesset as Prime Minister in 1992, Yitzhak Rabin articulated this as the wish of many Israelis:

> No longer are we necessarily "a people that dwells alone," and no longer is it true that "the whole world is against us." We must overcome the sense of isolation that has held us in its thrall for almost half a century. We must join the international movement toward peace, reconciliation and cooperation that is spreading over the entire globe these days – lest we be the last to remain, all alone, in the station.

Political Zionism's pioneering moment may have passed. After all, it succeeded, against incredible odds, in establishing the Jewish State. But its hold on the national discourse is maintained by the sense that that success is tenuous and must be constantly defended from external and internal assault.

To all this may be added another layer, which is perhaps more disconcerting. As a people, we have become so used to crisis that we may worry (subconsciously) whether we can maintain our unity and collective purpose without it. Crisis is a powerful rallying cry and a useful political tool. It generates commitment, sacrifice, mutual responsibility, and philanthropy. It can help

smooth over fundamental differences and defer divisive issues. What would the Jewish people look like in the absence of some defining emergency as its focal point? How would collective activism be maintained? Would there be a core narrative or set of values that would keep us united?

Given our enemies, our history and the enduring spirit of the political Zionist ethos, the Jewish people can be forgiven for worrying so insistently over the last decades about the threats to their sovereign state. But even if we understand the origins and the attraction of this narrative, we need not embrace its hegemony over the discourse. It is perhaps time to consider the fallout of this preoccupation. What has the national conversation missed by being so focused on crisis? Who have we alienated? What have we lost?

The Place of Values

Even if necessary or unavoidable, the crisis model is inadequate. It is not just that many Jews – especially younger ones — cannot reconcile this model with the success they see, or the comfort and safety they feel. It is that this model fails to provide a compelling narrative as to why Israel can, or ought to, be both central and meaningful for contemporary Jewish life.

Especially for those Jews indifferent to, or disillusioned with, Israel, the conventional narrative is both narrow and shallow. Narrow, in that its focus is on the physical existence of the Jewish people in their homeland, not on the breadth of what this sovereign project might offer for the collective Jewish experience. Shallow, in that it pursues Jewish survival for its own sake but tells no deeper story as to why that survival is important and worth fighting for. This may be self-evident for some, but an increasing number of young Jews seem to have little stake in Israel's quest for survival, and a conversation centered around the threats Israel faces creates little incentive for them to care.

The result has been that while many have been engrossed in a passionate debate about confronting the dangers to Israel, wide circles of Jews are not sure why that survival is important for them and seem to feel embarrassed or even endangered by what they perceive to be Israel's excesses.

The limited nature and scope of the current discourse offers no response to these concerns. It takes the necessity of Israel and its centrality for granted. It expects the conversation to focus on how to guarantee it. Some even consider a genuine Jewish debate about Israel's significance as opening the door to Israel's enemies: it is seen as questioning Israel's legitimacy and ultimately empowering its detractors. After all, no one asks why Finland is important, so why should Israel be treated differently? In a world of mortal threats, the very question appears dangerous.

For all the dominance and appeal of the current approach, it is both possible and necessary to imagine the template for a different kind of Jewish conversation about Israel. This narrative would focus less on what is *needed* to protect the Jewish State, and more on what kind of state we *want* Israel to be. It is a values-driven discussion that is concerned primarily with a debate about the principles we would like Israeli society to embody.

A values-based conversation about Israel differs from the crisis narrative in four important ways. First, it is internally motivated, not externally driven. In a values conversation, it does not matter whether Israel is being criticized or applauded. We are not concerned with what it will take to repel a threat or answer a critic. We are engaged in what it will take to address Israel's challenges and build a society that reflects the values, tradition and experience of our people. It is a conversation about us.

Those engaged in a values conversation measure success not by whether we can persuade the world about the justice of our cause, but by whether *we* are comfortable with the moral dimensions of our policies. In a crisis-

driven narrative, the issue of minorities in Israel, to take one example, is unlikely to be addressed unless it is seen as a threat to Israel's survival or a propaganda weapon for Israel's opponents. In a values-based conversation the way a Jewish society relates to its minorities exists as an independent question that deserves our attention, regardless of whether it receives the attention of others.

Second, in the crisis model the conversation turns (and often splinters) on the measures needed to repel the dangers we face. It focuses on the nature of the concrete response to a given threat. A values-driven conversation, however, does not ask what should be done before it asks with what set of values should thoughtful and morally responsible Jews engage the issue. It is as concerned with the questions we ask as with the answers we give.

If, for example, the conversation about Israel's response to the Turkish flotilla incident had been more values sensitive, the first question would be what moral issues are at play here. Rather than center the debate on the military and public relations implications of interdiction on the high seas, we would first identify the moral tension between our humanitarian responsibilities to others and our security responsibilities to ourselves. We would examine, and argue about, how these moral responsibilities could best be met in the circumstances. And because this tension provides no easy answer, we may recognize that the Jew who questions the propriety of Israel's forceful response in this case is not engaged in an act of betrayal, any more than the Jew who supports it is engaged in an act of moral bankruptcy. If both are genuinely trying to strike an appropriate balance between legitimate ethical objectives, they are both fulfilling the same responsibility to meet this challenge with a Jewish moral response.

Third, in the crisis model, criticism of Israel and its policies are inherently problematic. If the focus is on confronting the external dangers to Israel, Jewish criticism – especially when publicly expressed — is seen as demoralizing the Jewish people and providing ammunition to Israel's enemies. Unity of message is critical. In practice, of course, those engaged in the crisis narrative regularly criticize one another publicly and, at times, ferociously. But this is not because they see a plurality of Jewish voices in the debate about Israel as a value in itself. It is because they see views that diverge from their own as dangerous to Israel and requiring a powerful response.

By contrast, a values conversation would welcome a plurality of voices, provided they are inspired by moral impulses and genuine concern for the welfare of the Jewish State. Because the conversation is seen as internal in nature, it is less concerned with (and, to be sure, provides less of an answer for) the way criticism may be exploited by Israel's adversaries. Its focus is the creation of a shared moral Jewish discourse about the Jewish people's sovereign project.

Put another way, for those committed to the crisis mindset, Jewish unity is defined by the common threats we face, and it demands loyalty to a common policy — usually the policy of the Israeli government in office at any given time. A values narrative, however, sees Jewish unity in terms of a common moral engagement. We are united as a people neither because we agree nor because our common survival is at stake. We are united because of a shared commitment to engage in the complex, partially agonizing, often divisive, and sometimes exhilarating process of writing the next chapter of Jewish history in a way that is worthy of our tradition.

Fourth, and finally, the ultimate purpose of a values conversation differs markedly from the conventional discourse. If the crisis narrative is driven by the moral imperative of survival, then the guiding principle for the values narrative may be taken from the biblical commandment of *kedoshim tihiyu* – to be a holy people.

What animates a discussion about Israel founded on values is the unique opportunity and responsibility that comes with belonging to a people that is 3500 years old. The question

it seeks to address is not "how do we survive?" It is this: as custodians of an ancient story, as bearers of a particular moral tradition and as a people shaped by particular historical experience, what form and nature should a Jewish sovereign society take?

Aspirational Zionism

Unlike the political Zionism that underpins the crisis model, a values-based narrative is inspired by what may be called "aspirational Zionism." Historically, political Zionism was primarily concerned with Jewish survival, and today it continues to promote a state that defines its Jewishness in minimalistic and, largely if not exclusively, survivalist terms.

Israel is Jewish in the sense that it has a Jewish majority to maintain Jewish political self-determination; that the Law of Return enables all Jews to find refuge here; that the state feels an obligation to protect Jews worldwide; and that the state's public symbols and days of rest have Jewish origins.

But in what way can it be said that Israel's policies or its society reflect Jewish values or aspirations? By this, I do not mean the way in which Israel meets Torah standards or approaches theocracy. I mean that the kind of Zionism that a values narrative engenders is one that imagines Israel not as a "normal state," but as a state that gives public expression to the unique history and tradition of the Jewish people. It argues that the "chosen people" in the Holy Land need to aspire to more than the normalcy and safety offered by political Zionism. They need to debate, articulate, and ultimately seek to implement what the prophetic vision of a sovereign nation that lives in righteousness means in modern times.

This does not imply that high moral aspirations must trump *realpolitik* calculations. In Israel's case, that would be naïve and dangerous. What's more, concerns about survival and deterring the sinister intentions of our enemies *are* moral concerns. But in a values conversation, the moral message and foundations of Israeli policy become a more explicit and conscious part of our deliberations.

This aspirational Zionism would ask more aggressively how we create a society that is both Jewish and democratic – recognizing both as values that need to live in harmony with one another. It would examine options for a responsible and lasting peace not only through the prism of Israel's basic need and right for security and stability, but also through a Jewish prism that sees the relentless and genuine pursuit of peace as a moral and quintessentially Jewish obligation. And it would examine Israel's social and economic challenges by asking not only how to enhance prosperity and reward excellence, but also by honoring the Jewish obligation to care for the needy and vulnerable.

Aspirational Zionism sees the pursuit of peace as a moral and quintessentially Jewish obligation.

In responding to external events too, aspirational Zionism would demand a different kind of sensitivity. Issues such as refugees seeking asylum in Israel, popular uprisings in the Arab world, the establishment of an International Criminal Court would be seen through a Jewish values lens, not just a survivalist one. This would involve a higher moral reckoning that is not confined to threat analysis but explores what a response to global events that is true to Jewish values and history would look like.

Can the crisis model make space for this type of conversation? Is it naïve to think that we can afford to engage in this kind of aspirational discourse when facing such constant peril?

Paradoxically, it seems increasingly to be the case that the obsession with a crisis-based approach is itself creating a kind of crisis.

The lack of sufficient attention to values is alienating too many Jews and harming Israel's image and legitimacy on the world stage. Israel is not Finland. Though its right to exist is unquestionable, the task of ensuring its security and welfare requires costs and sacrifices that the Finnish people are spared. Unless those costs and sacrifices are grounded in an aspiration greater than physical survival, unless they are tied to a higher calling, fewer and fewer Jews will be willing to pay the price.

An exaggerated focus on crisis also endangers us in other ways. Even from a pure survivalist perspective, the sense that Israel is obsessed with the precariousness of its sovereign existence does much to embolden its enemies. We have reason to be confident in our capacity to meet the threats we face and, from a strategic and policy perspective, even more reason to broadcast that confidence to Israel's citizens, to our friends and (most importantly) to our adversaries.

A turn toward values, and reducing the rhetoric of fear in Israeli discourse, signals something important to those that wish us harm. It conveys determination and resilience. The sense that we are worried about our fate empowers our enemies. The sense that we are shaping our destiny out of collective purpose and a confident belief in our place in the world undermines their resolve and strengthens our own.

A Shared Moral Discourse

There is no guarantee that a focus on values will overcome the substantial divisions over Israel within the Jewish world. In fact, it may even uncover some rifts that the focus on crisis has helped conceal. But the elusive pursuit of a Jewish consensus about Israel is less important than creating an inclusive Jewish conversation. Crisis is becoming an increasingly insufficient and illusory crutch for sustaining worldwide Jewish commitment to Israel. An honest attempt to shape a Jewish moral discourse about Israel makes that commitment more meaningful.

Conducted responsibly, a values-driven conversation creates a bigger tent in which our differences are less rancorous and divisive. Such a conversation has the potential to transcend political divides, not because it resolves disputes, but because it recognizes that what ultimately connects the Jewish people to Israel is not a shared fate or policy position, but a common moral calling.

The idea that the Jewish conversation should move beyond survival is not new. The Jewish tradition has always demanded much more from us than self-preservation. Under the burden of slavery in Egypt, the Jewish people sought freedom not for its own sake but for a higher purpose. And today, under the burden of threats to our sovereign project we should demand no less of ourselves.

Indeed, Zionism was never only a response to crisis – it was a values project from its inception. In fact, many Israeli policies and the debates around them can be understood on moral grounds, even if they are more often couched today in survivalist terms.

It is possible to generate a Jewish conversation about Israel in which the discussion both about the society we wish to create *and* the threats we must face comes from a more mature, healthier, less traumatized place. It does not require of us to diminish the dangers we face to argue that we should aspire to confront them with a sense of inner confidence where we neither resort to measures nor shy away from them because of the scars and demons of our collective past. It requires that we appreciate that the pursuit of our physical survival is empowered and made more meaningful – not weakened or undercut – by debating the collective purpose and moral message of the Jewish people and their sovereign state.

When our engagement with Israel is so defined we create the space to aspire to and realize our better selves. Maybe then, we will know we have come home to the Jewish State. Maybe then, we can build one truer to its name.

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