

A Letter to Friends on the Right



Right-wing Jews have played an essential role in fortifying Jewish identity and dispelling wishful thinking about Israel's security. To achieve their goals, they should also be less dismissive of the insights and values of their rivals on the left



Jewish life is meant to be aspirational – who we are does not exhaust or define who we ought to be. From the moment when God commanded: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am Holy” (Leviticus 19:2), the standard was set. Being a chosen people is not an indication of inherent holiness, but entails an obligation to aspire to holiness.

{ By **YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI**

For the last three decades, since moving to Israel, I have been engaged in an argument with you. It is a complicated, often wrenching argument, in part because it is a quarrel with a part of myself. I was educated in the Betar youth movement in New York of the 1960s, then “graduated” to Meir Kahane’s Jewish Defense League. The Zionist songs of my childhood weren’t about kibbutzniks and fields of wheat but Irgun fighters and blood and fire. We protested against anti-Semitic regimes and went to jail for Soviet Jewry. Like all idealists, we saw ourselves as an elite of sacrifice. We were the few who truly understood the lessons of Jewish history.

My ideological break with militant Zionism began with a rethinking of the meaning of Judaism – the realization that Jewish identity is a particularist strategy whose universalist goal is world redemption. The relentless self-absorption of the Jewish right, I concluded, confuses means with end, and celebrates Jewishness as its own justification, with scant interest in, let alone responsibility toward, the rest of humanity. My Jewish identity today remains deeply rooted in the particular, while actively seeking engagement with other faiths – not only to protect Jewish interests but as a spiritual value in itself.

Still, my argument with you is complicated by the fact that I remain in tactical if no longer ideological agreement with much of your worldview – especially regarding the need for wariness about the Arab world’s intentions toward Israel. And as the international assault on the legitimacy of Israel has intensified, the Jewish “street smarts” I learned on the right have helped me face this moment without illusion – even as some Jews seem to have lost their intuitive faculty to discern existential threat. I recall our contempt for the old delusions of the Jews – those who believed in Stalin or in FDR or in German *kultur* – and sense that we are experiencing another outbreak of destructive wishful thinking, this time among Jews on the left convinced that the Palestinian leadership is ready for peace, and that the main obstacle to ending the conflict is Israel.

Yet the severity of my quarrel with the left does not lessen the severity of my quarrel with you. As tempting as it sometimes seems, I cannot return to the warm embrace of the right, because in your camp too there is delusion, and a danger of self-destructiveness. In your approach to the future of the territories, you selectively focus on the security threat that confirms your worldview, while ignoring or minimizing the moral and demographic threats of ongoing occupation. (Of course much of the left is guilty of the same selective approach, but in reverse.) The result is often a demonization of your political opponents, perceived as an existential threat. Over the years I have heard some on the right compare leftists to the Israelite spies who warned Moses against entering the land, or even the *erev rav*, the non-Jews who latched onto the Exodus and are sometimes (conveniently) blamed in rabbinic discourse for the corruption of Israel. “Your destroyers will come from among you,” says Isaiah (in a possible misreading of Chapter 49, Verse 17), and that warning is often applied to “the left” – with little distinction between leftwing Zionists and anti-Zionists.

When we turn our fellow Jews into a threat to Jewish survival, we lose the most basic sense of shared fate. The debate over Jewish survival becomes itself a threat to Jewish survival.

The Zionist Roots of Schism

I know the deep *ahavat Yisrael* – love for the Jewish people – that motivates the right at its best. But I also know how that love can turn against itself – how frustration with the perceived limitations of one’s fellow Jews can lead to contempt and worse. In the tendency within your camp to ascribe the most base motives to your Jewish opponents, I recall the hatred toward Mapai, the old Labor Zionist movement, on which I was raised. This hatred, of course, was more than reciprocated. But we were the camp that emphasized *ahavat Yisrael*, and so I judge us by our own standards. We were engaged not merely in an ideological

dispute with our opponents, but in a war of mutual delegitimization. It was, ironically, a retroactive war, because the most bitter years of the feud between the Jabotinsky movement and the Labor movement were behind us. Still, we adopted its venom and its grudges as our own.

The text of our hatred for our fellow Zionists was a book called *Perfidy*. Its author was Ben Hecht, the preeminent Hollywood screenwriter. But we knew him as the cohort of Peter Bergson, the Irgunist sent to the United States to organize a rescue effort for European Jewry, and who was stymied by a fearful and incompetent American Jewish establishment.

Perfidy offers an account of the Kastner trial of the early 1950s, in which a Hungarian Labor Zionist leader named Rudolf Kastner was accused of collaborating with the Nazis. But *Perfidy's* agenda was far more ambitious than a mere indictment of a middle-level Labor Zionist leader from the Transylvanian periphery: its real target was the Labor Zionist leadership in Israel. According to Hecht, Labor Zionist leaders – “the politicized princes in Jerusalem” – deliberately turned their backs on Europe’s Jews during the Holocaust, partly because they cared more about power than rescue, partly because they cowardly deferred to the British occupiers, partly because they didn’t want the “wrong” kind of Jews – the non-socialists, the Orthodox – to muddy their utopian experiment. *Perfidy* offers the reader only one possible conclusion: that the most revered Jews of our time – Ben-Gurion, Chaim Weizmann – were in fact traitors, collaborators in their people’s destruction.

As a boy, I read and re-read *Perfidy*, convinced I had found the missing explanation for why the Jews, betrayed by the revered leaders of official Zionism, had been such easy victims.

It was only years later that I began to realize just how insidious – how perfidious – *Perfidy* was. *Perfidy* ignored the grief of the Labor pioneers who left behind entire families in Eastern Europe. And it trivialized the agonizing dilemma of a small and powerless Jewish

community under British occupation, torn between the need to rescue and the need to build. No liberation movement ever faced such a cruel choice. For Ben Hecht, though, Labor Zionists were hardly less callous – and far more contemptible – than the British colonial officials who barred Jewish refugees from entering the land of Israel.

Fortunately, *Perfidy* is largely forgotten. But the *Perfidy* sensibility – the notion that your Jewish opponent acts not out of goodwill, however misguided, but out of meanness, cowardice, and ultimately treason – informs much of rightwing discourse today.

The Existential Challenge to Civility

In my plea to you to regard your political opponents with respect, I well appreciate the almost unbearable tensions this debate imposes on you. Those of us who favor withdrawal in exchange for a genuine peace – however remote that scenario is today – often speak with thoughtless ease about evacuating dozens of settlements that will find themselves on the wrong side of a future border. When I visit your communities, I am amazed anew by the vitality of what you have built, and moved anew by your courage and dedication, by the self-evident logic of the Jewish people re-inhabiting the landscape of its youth.

If we ever do achieve an agreement with the Palestinians, I will mourn the destruction of Judea and Samaria before I celebrate the peace. For me too it will be a *hurban*, an apocalyptic destruction – all the more painful because it is self-inflicted.

How, then, do we reasonably debate an outcome that would destroy your life’s work, the defining commitment of your generation? And given your certainty that withdrawal from Judea and Samaria would threaten the very existence of Israel, how do we debate – with respect, with restraint – an issue with life and death implications?



Gush Emunim leader Hanan Porat and followers celebrating the authorization to settle in Sebastia, Samaria, West Bank, 1975. Photo by: Moshe Milner, GPO.

In fact, our territorial dilemma is even more complicated and wrenching. A proponent of withdrawal can likewise make a compelling case about why *remaining* in the territories poses an existential threat to Israel, that the price of permanent occupation is the undoing of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, ending the dream of Israel as a respected nation in the international community and alienating even many of our friends abroad, including much of world Jewry – all factors that threaten Israel's survival in the long term.

What makes our debate so brutal, then, is that each camp fears that a victory by its rival won't merely diminish the state but destroy it.

The New Israeli Center

Most Israelis today, who are neither left nor right but an uneasy mixture of the two, tend to regard a Palestinian state as both an existential threat *and* an existential necessity. We centrists – and we are now the majority – have internalized the left-right schism. For us, the debate isn't happening between separate camps but rival and compelling voices within each of us. Leftists and rightists argue with each other; a centrist argues with himself.

The emergence of a centrist majority is a sign of Israeli maturation, one of the most hopeful developments in the history of the Israeli polity. For me, the appeal of the center is its capacity to hold *clal Yisrael*, the totality

of the Jewish people, within its being – and upholding *clal Yisrael* is a value I learned on the right.

Crucially, both ideological camps have helped shaped the center. In the four-decade debate over the future of the territories, your camp has played an essential role in warning against wishful thinking about peace. Yet you continue to dismiss the essential role played by the left in forcing us to face another hard reality, the consequences of occupation.

In lectures in American Jewish communities, I often confront Diaspora critics of Israel with this challenge: Are you as concerned for the well-being of my Israeli body as you are for my Israeli soul? To you I pose the opposite question: In defending Israel's strategic needs, how can you – religious Jews! – ignore the consequences of occupation on the Jewish soul?

There is an irony at the heart of the left-right debate in Israel: secular leftists tend to dismiss the notion of Jewish chosenness while insisting that Israel take risks for peace that no nation in our place would take, insisting in effect on a politics of chosenness; while religious rightists who celebrate chosenness in effect demand the right to act as shabbily as everyone else.

A healthy people should appreciate its rival camps, each of which is attuned to different elements of the Jewish experience. Understandably, each camp emphasizes the vision and is alert to the dangers that most deeply reflect its own values and anxieties. Less

understandably, each camp has minimized or entirely ignored the vital insights of the other. The dismissal of some on the left regarding the dangers of a Palestinian state has undermined the left's credibility for centrist Israelis. But your credibility too has been undermined by the attempt to downplay the demographic and moral threat of ongoing occupation, insisting, for example, that the numbers of Palestinians in the West Bank are inflated – as if a half-million fewer Palestinians ultimately matters in terms of Israel's Jewish and democratic nature.

In your dismissal of your rivals' contribution to the quality of Jewish discourse, you confuse the idea of a community with the idea of a people. A community is a self-selecting group of relatively homogenous people committed to similar ideas and lifestyles; a people, by contrast, is an unwieldy framework for disparate and even contradictory ideologies. The Zionist revolution has transformed us back into a people; cultural and ideological differences are the inescapable consequence of ingathering the exiles. As Zionists, we have no choice but to accept – no, to celebrate – the diversity that precludes any ideology from gaining a monopoly on Israeli identity.

By its very nature, a people requires an inner accommodation of diversity – and how much more so a people in our situation, confronting multiple existential challenges.

Purim Jews, Passover Jews

The more I immersed in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict – as a reservist based in the territories, as a journalist, finally as a participant in reconciliation efforts – the more I came to appreciate the inadequacy of either right or left to understand, let alone manage, its maddening complexity. Each camp turned out to be expert in assessing the fatal flaw of the other. But neither could fulfill its most basic promise: the left couldn't provide peace, and you couldn't provide security. The first intifada ended the dream of the "complete land of Israel;" the second intifada ended the dream of "peace now." Centrist Israelis have internalized the consequences of both failures. And their conclusion is that the only

justification for occupying another people is security, not historical claim – no matter how compelling.

And yet, for all their limitations, I celebrate both the settlement movement and the peace movement as indispensable expressions of Jewish history. Had there not arisen among us after the Six-Day War a group that tried to fulfill the vision of millennia and re-settle the biblical heartland, there would have been something deficient in our historical consciousness, a retroactive negation of generations of prayer. By the same measure, had there not arisen among us a group committed above all to peace and justice, our most cherished self-definition as *rachmanim b'nai rachmanim*, merciful children of merciful parents, would have been exposed as sham.

The Palestinian problem is so wrenching for Jews because it is the convergence point for two non-negotiable demands of Jewish history. On the one hand, we are commanded to remember that we were slaves in Egypt and to be sensitive to the stranger in our midst. That commandment became the motivating principle for the Jewish left. On the other hand, we are commanded to remember Amalek, which attacked us, unprovoked, in the desert, intending to annihilate us.

The left reminds us: Don't be brutal; when the stranger makes a claim on your conscience, listen. The right reminds us: Don't be naïve; when your enemy says he intends to destroy you, believe him.

Another way, then, of understanding our left-right divide is as a struggle between two moments in Jewish history: between "Passover Jews" whose politics are motivated by the memory of slavery in Egypt, and "Purim Jews" whose politics are motivated by the memory of the genocidal intentions of Haman the Amalekite.

The Palestinian problem pits Passover against Purim: the stranger in our midst is the enemy that wants to usurp us. But after the 1994 massacre of Palestinian worshippers in the Tomb of the Patriarchs – which Dr. Baruch Goldstein committed, not coincidentally, on Purim morning – one must make the obvious but necessary disclaimer here: Palestinians are

not the descendants, literally or spiritually, of Amalek. While Amalek was motivated by pure hatred of the Jews, our war with the Palestinians, bitter as it is, is the result of counter-claims and narratives.

The clash over competing Jewish values is particularly acute in Hebron. There are few places in the Land of Israel that I feel more deeply connected to than the City of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. And I resonate with the arguments of Hebron's settlers: what people would voluntarily cede control over its birthplace, of its most ancient pantheon? And yes, the presence of settlers in Hebron helps ensure relatively safe Jewish access to the Tomb of the Patriarchs. And yet: consider the price of maintaining a Jewish presence in Hebron – including closing down Arab shops to create a cordon of safety around the Jewish enclaves. Each time I visit Hebron the dilemma appears more acute. How can we remain true to ourselves if we leave Hebron? How can we remain true to ourselves if we stay under these conditions?

Multi-Dimensional Jews

The way we approach the Hebron conundrum, as our other political and moral dilemmas, often depends on one's Jewish experiences. During the first intifada I served in a reservist unit in Gaza with a new immigrant from South Africa, whom I'll call Ze'ev. His deepest fear was of an apartheid Israel; in the refugee camps we patrolled, Ze'ev saw Soweto.

In our same unit was a new immigrant from Ethiopia named Shimon, who had trekked to a Sudanese refugee camp in the mid-1980s. Like other Jews there, he had hidden his Jewishness from the Arab authorities; but a Sudanese soldier, suspecting he was Jewish, crushed his bare foot with an iron-tipped boot. Now Shimon walked with a limp. His greatest fear was that the Arab world would destroy Israel, and that he and his family would be returned to a refugee camp. Gaza turned Ze'ev into a leftist, and Shimon into a rightist.

We are the Jews we are, then, largely because of the Jews we were. Can we learn to respect the wisdom and fears accumulated in our

varied wanderings? More profoundly, can we learn to internalize each other's indispensable insights?

We are all afraid for Israel – but we call our fears by different, sometimes contradictory, names. Our shared fear is that our return to this land is conditional, that we can once again forfeit our hold here – because of a lack of sufficient love for the land, because of a lack of sufficient sensitivity to the stranger among us; because of the hedonism of Tel Aviv, because of the fanaticism of Bnei Brak. In a sense all our arguments are about the same question: what is the fateful “sin” that may unravel the return of the Jews home?

Yet even as I respect the passion of those who ask that question, I fear their answers. I fear the destructive capacity of true believers who always know precisely what Israel must do, regardless of the consequences if they are wrong. Perhaps the shared “sin” of our ideologues is a lack of humility. Sometimes it seems to me that Israel needs to be saved most of all from its would-be saviors of left and right.

How, then, to begin the process of transforming our discourse? One way is by acknowledging that the fanatics don't in fact define their respective camps. Each camp has a fatal *yetzer harah*, an evil temptation, and that *yetzer harah* is expressed on the fringe, which seeks ideological purity and perfection: violence on the right, betrayal on the left. The fringes need to be discredited – and that can only be achieved by the mainstream of each camp.

In the end, though, I am not arguing for a policy but a sensibility. The challenge of our generation is to create a multi-dimensional Jewish personality capable of containing differing, even opposing insights from across the political and cultural spectrum. Your camp has a crucial role to play in diffusing the growing alienation between Jews. The capacity to acknowledge that your opponent too has an indispensable insight culled from Jewish history and likewise speaks with the authority of Jewish values would go a long way toward accomplishing the goal you so passionately endorse: healing the Jewish people.



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