

# BOOKS

## Israel's DNA

An excerpt from **Avi Jorisch's** new book  
'Thou Shalt Innovate: How Israeli Ingenuity Repairs the World.'

**I**sraelis have a reputation for unconventional thinking, and the man who epitomizes this is Avi Yaron. Over the course of a car ride, he told me his story, and I was so shocked I was worried I'd get into an accident.

In 1993, Yaron's motorcycle crashed, and he was rushed to the hospital. There, the doctors gave him both good and bad news: The crash hadn't done much physical damage, but they had discovered a brain tumor.

"I was in a complete state of shock," he recalls. "But I was not sure the doctors were completely honest and open with me."

Under the best of circumstances, the doctors told him, he would likely become paralyzed on one side of his body and suffer significant mental impairment. Yaron was saddened, but knew he needed to find a way out of his predicament.

His tumor kept growing, and there was nothing his doctors could do.

The problem was that the tools brain surgeons use to operate were too big. Yaron was told that maybe someone would create the technology in the next five years. Thinking he might not have that long, he came up with a solution. He started a company called Visionsense and spent almost a decade developing a type of operating scope modeled after the structure of an insect's eyes.

"The technology works and saves thousands of lives globally now," says Yaron.

As we drove through the Judean Hills, it struck me that Yaron had used chutzpah to cheat death. And in doing so, he had created a remarkable innovation that was now being used to help people around the world do the same.

What drove him, I felt, wasn't a singular expression of his character, but something larger, something definitively Israeli. It made me wonder: How did such a small country become a nation that felt a deep need to dispel darkness and bring more light to the world?

### A light unto the nations

Israel's innovative success stems from a number of factors, including creating a culture that encourages its citizens to challenge authority, ask the next question, and defy the obvious. Various factors such as chutzpah, obligatory military service, renowned universities, smart big government, a dearth of natural resources, and diversity come together as national characteristics to explain how tiny Israel became a technological powerhouse.

But rather than simply enriching people or making our lives more convenient, many Israeli tech companies also wind up making the world a far better place.

I started asking a variety of innovators why, and I got a variety of answers. Often, people cited a member of the family who inspired them - mothers, fathers, or spouses. But as I dug deeper, many ascribed their motivation to Israeli or Jewish culture.

Eli Beer, the man behind the ambulance and the founder of the United Hatzalah emergency medical response organization, explained how his father always underscored

the importance of "being a mensch and doing good."

Shlomo Navarro, the creator of the Grain Cocoon, believes "it is inherent in our blood to do a revolution, to do something for the benefit of others." He remembers learning about the importance of these values at the Jewish school he attended in his native Turkey and as a member of a Zionist youth movement.

Bernard Bar-Natan, the creator of the Emergency Bandage, learned about doing good from his parents, both of whom were Holocaust survivors.

What happened in Israel, I realized, was part of a larger, unconscious process that evolved and spread across the country.

Reem Younis, the cofounder of Alpha Omega, Israel's largest Arab hi-tech company, perhaps articulated this idea best. "It came from my father, the school I went to, and networking with Israelis," she says. "Israel's culture has spread through osmosis."

### Like the Protestant work ethic - for Jews

Since the Middle Ages, and possibly before, Jews have recited a prayer called "*Aleinu*" three times a day. The prayer instructs us, among other things, to repair the world. We believe we are partners with God, that we share a responsibility in spreading morality and justice around the world. The Mishna, the classic body of rabbinic teachings codified around the second century CE, references *tikun olam* 10 times, mandating extra protection to the potentially disadvantaged for the sake of repairing the world. And for his part, Isaiah the Prophet called on the Jewish people to act as a "light unto the nations" (Isaiah 42:6).

The Jewish message of helping others is also strong in *Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers*), a compilation of ethical teachings put together by rabbis around the second and third centuries CE. Two of the most famous maxims include Rabbi Tarfon's statement "It is not incumbent on you to complete the task, but nor are you free to desist from it," and Hillel's series of questions "If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? But when I am for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?"

"There is no question that *tikun olam* is at the very heart and soul of Zionist ideology," says Jerusalem-based Rabbi David Rosen, the former chief rabbi of Ireland and the American Jewish Committee's director for international interreligious understanding.

One of the most important Jewish philosophers, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (commonly known as Maimonides or Rambam) famously wrote that there are eight levels of charity, of which one of the highest is to give charity anonymously, while the lowest is to do so unwillingly.

Similarly, the motivations driving the various Israeli innovators featured in this book cover a wide spectrum - some set out to make money, others to primarily do good. But each one of them has in effect given charity and has significantly impacted the lives of an untold number of people.

While Israel is certainly "not a country of all saints or do-gooders," as Yossi Vardi gently explained to me as we sat staring at the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of the Hamptons, Jewish culture has bred "a nation of people who do seek higher meaning."

Israel's founding fathers were inspired by these religious teachings. Chief among them was David Ben-Gurion, the country's first prime minister.

"We extend our hand to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighborliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land," said Ben-Gurion when he declared statehood in 1948. "The State of Israel is prepared to do its share in a common effort for the advancement of the entire Middle East."

Even the national emblem of Israel, a menorah - the biblical seven-branched lamp-stand - symbolizes Israel's desire to act as a source of light.

The Old Man's words may sound ironic or cynical today, especially knowing what would ensue during the war (and the violence that continues today in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza). But Ben-Gurion was sincere, and his words are part of a long tradition of Jewish aspiration.

Five decades earlier, in 1896, Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, touched on that idea when he laid out his vision for a modern Jewish state. A central pillar of his treatise *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*) involves Zionists striving for social change: "Whatever we attempt [in the state of the Jews] for our own benefit," he wrote, "will redound mightily and beneficially to the good of all mankind."

In the 70 years since the country's founding, Israel has faced enormous challenges: It has fought a war every decade; it has faced diplomatic and economic isolation; and its population has grown immensely, as the nation has taken in millions from around the world. Along the way, Israel has come under heavy criticism, particularly in regard to its treatment of Palestinian Arabs. But for all its flaws, the young nation continues to exercise political, economic and moral leadership that radiates well beyond its narrow borders.

For many in the Jewish community, repairing the world has meant doing good, saving the environment and engaging in social activism. Just as the Protestant work ethic that took root among the early settlers in the United States is now ingrained in American culture, the words and vision of Israel's founding fathers - and their historical forebears - have deeply affected the country's multiethnic society.

For the Israelis featured in this book - who include doctors, scientists, agronomists, botanists, and engineers of a variety of faiths, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - repairing the world has become a defining purpose. Israel's betterment of the world is a mosaic of one person at a time with one innovation at a time.

THOU SHALT INNOVATE

How Israeli Ingenuity Repairs the World



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Thou Shalt Innovate  
By Avi Jorisch  
Gefen Publishing House  
284 pages

Say  
What?  
BY LIAT COLLINS

Le'tiferet medinat  
Yisrael

לתפארת מדינת ישראל

**Meaning:** To the glory of the State of Israel  
The phrase recited by the torch lighters at the eve of Independence Day ceremony.

**Example:** The level of the arguments over the ceremony is not *le'tiferet medinat Yisrael*.