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OUTLOOK

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Without a Connection to the Past, There Is No Future

Israel's 75th Independence Day last week should have been a cause for celebration. It wasn't.

Israel's Jews now are at war with each other. Even on Remembrance Day for Israel's war dead, which immediately precedes Independence Day, scuffles broke out between families at a number of cemeteries. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu pulled out of a scheduled speech to the World Zionist Organization, after it became clear that hecklers would make it impossible for him to be heard.

All the societal red lines have been crossed. Refusals to obey orders in the IDF and a deliberate (and successful) attempt to lower Israel's credit rating have become legitimate tools of politics. On Holocaust Remembrance Day, an El Al pilot lectured a captive audience of passengers that dictatorships, like Israel is in danger of becoming, are responsible

for events like the Holocaust.

In an excellent article in Tablet, Liel Leibowitz summarized how the months of demonstrations have long since passed from "the realm of the political to the metaphysical," and "soft appeals to brotherhood and shared destiny aren't likely to resolve [the conflict]. The debate we're having right now is a century in the making, and the only way out is to go through it. It's time for Israel to choose."

That choice is between those for whom "Israel ha[s] no meaning and no reason to exist other than in the context of the ancient and eternal Jewish story, a story which the other side feels is at best a genial abstraction and at worst an invitation to theocracy, misogyny... and other forms of prejudice and oppression."

On a visit back to his native country, Leibowitz was told by one of the leaders of the demonstrations, "We're here because we want this to be a normal state, you understand, just like the United States or France or Germany. We don't want this country to be taken over by those fanatics with their beards and their religion."

"Our democracy," behind which slogan the demonstrators rally, has nothing to do with "defending the actual outcome of elections, which they lost," Leibowitz observes. A Jewish state — i.e., a state governed by those for whom the birth of Israel ushered in another stage in the millennial story of the Jewish People on their ancient land — "could easily be fully democratic," writes Leibowitz, while maintaining a public square that is rooted in Jewish history. But a state of Jews, or "a state of its citizens," as its proponents has sometimes refer to their ideal for Israel, "has no real reason to make special accommodations for any faith-based particularities, including those of practicing Jews — even if a majority of Israelis so desire, and even if no one's rights are jeopardized as a result."

For the demonstrators — as for their hero, former Court President Aharon Barak — elections deliver only a "hollow form of democracy." In order for that government to be legitimate in their eyes, it is





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necessary “to make sure that the people who run it have the right ideas.”

Those demonstrators are right, according to Leibowitz, that the state imagined by voters for the current governing coalition “has nothing to do with the one they and their ancestors built.” For their ancestors, the Zionist project ended with the securing of a sovereign state. Those ancestors sought to become Israelis, a new breed of person, and their descendants have no wish “to be reminded by their neighbors [or the majority in the Knesset] that they are Jews.”

ZIONISM WAS THE OUTGROWTH of European intellectual currents of the 18th and 19th centuries. While the formal logic of the Enlightenment led to the granting of individual rights to Jews, it failed to cure anti-Semitism, as Herzl realized when he covered the trial of French army officer Albert Dreyfus on charges of treason. In some ways, the Enlightenment even rendered Jews more vulnerable by undermining communal solidarity and collective identity. Count Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre enunciated the rule for the French Revolution: “To the Jews as a nation, nothing; to the Jews as individuals, everything.”

Jews were even more thoroughly excluded by 19th-century nationalism, with its emphasis on land and race: Each race requires its own land in which to develop its own genius, according to the tenets of nationalism. But that again left the Jews out. While Jews might enjoy the rights of citizenship, they could never be Frenchmen, for instance, in the manner of descendants of the ancient Gauls. They must always remain an alien race and a threat to national homogeneity.

Theodore Herzl’s answer to the impossibility of Jews assimilating as individuals was for the Jews to achieve statehood, and thereby be able to assimilate as a nation into the community of other nations of the world. (That desire to be “as all the nations,” as the prophets warned, has not happened: Seventy-five years after its creation, Israel is the only nation in the world whose very right to exist, including the right to defend itself, remains an open question.)

The realization of Herzl’s vision required that the Jews first demonstrate that they were as worthy of nationhood as other races that had achieved it – that they were as brave and strong.

As Anita Shapira, a leading historian of Zionism, puts it, Herzl and the rest of his generation of Zionist leaders hoped to see the “rise of a generation from whom spiritual characteristics would be completely shed, one that would be outstanding in its lusts, its physical bravery, and its belligerence.”

That meant, inter alia, shedding Judaism. As Haim Hazaz pithily put it, “When it is difficult for a person to behave like a Jew, he becomes a Zionist.” Rav Kook took note that the most influential Zionist writers “connected the success of Zionism... with the uprooting of Torah and its laws.”

One of the central ideas of 19th-century nationalism was that each nation possesses its own unique character, which can only unfold optimally under conditions of national sovereignty. Yet by casting off Jewish religion, the Zionists were left with only European models upon which to draw. As a character in Herzl’s utopian novel *Altneuland* says, “Don’t imagine I am jesting when I say that Neudorf [the ideal Jewish community] was not built in Palestine. It was built in England, in America, in France, and in Germany.”

Thus, the irony at the heart of Zionism, which claimed to be a movement of Jewish national revival, was that its values were almost exclusively derived from contemporary European culture.



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THAT DEPENDENCE on Europeans models by the mainstream early Zionists is of a piece with the contemporary assertion by former Court President Aharon Barak — the icon of the protesters — of the right of judges to import into the Israeli legal system the values of other countries and to establish national norms on the basis of the views of the “enlightened” citizenry.

But the current protests are hardly the first iteration by Israeli elites of the universalist creed. The messianic frenzy of Oslo drew upon the same intellectual currents. As I wrote in the *Jerusalem Post* in 2001: “National identity in the eyes of Oslo’s most ardent supporters is the great enemy of peace. If people would just stop thinking of themselves as Jews or Moslems, Israelis or Palestinian, conflict would disappear.

“Oslo’s supporters convinced themselves that the world is moving towards a universalistic brotherhood of man, in which people will view themselves simply as human beings — nothing more or less. Propelling history in that direction, argues Thomas Friedman, is globalization. In the global village, men are primarily defined by their common desire to partake of increasing material bounty. Nothing else matters.”

Shimon Peres’s vision of a New Middle East, in which hotels are more important than battalions, and the cure for Palestinian unrest is greater investment in the Palestinian economy, was the perfect expression of that view.

The height of disdain for our past and all national identity was Prime Minister Ehud Barak’s acquiescence at Camp David to Arafat’s demand that Israel cede sovereignty over the Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism, symbolizing 2,000 years of yearning to return to the Land of Israel. Yair Sheleg pointed out in *Ha’aretz* that Barak could never have acted as he did unless Israel’s “academic, cultural, and media elites” had been ruled for a generation by those for whom national identity is irrelevant, surely not as important as a “little quiet and integration into the global village.”

The Palestinians, however, did not get the message. They saw in Israel’s disdain for its patrimony weakness and the loss of national will.

Salah Tamari, a former Palestinian terrorist, told Israeli journalist Aharon Barnea of the complete transformation he underwent in an Israeli prison. (I have told this story before.) While in prison, he had completely despaired of any hope that the Palestinians would one day realize any of their territorial dreams and was ready to renounce the struggle.

Then, one Pesach, he witnessed his Jewish warder eating a pita sandwich. Tamari was shocked, and asked his jailer how he could so unashamedly eat bread on Pesach.

The Jew replied: “I feel no obligation to events that took place over 2,000 years ago. I have no connection to that.”

That entire night, Tamari could not sleep. He thought to himself: “A nation whose members have no connection to their past, and are capable of so openly transgressing their most important laws — that

nation has cut off all its roots to the Land.”

He concluded that the Palestinians could, in fact, achieve all their goals. From that moment, he determined “to fight for everything — not a percentage, not such crumbs as the Israelis might throw us — but for everything. Because opposing us is a nation that has no connection to its roots, which are no longer of interest to it.”

Tamari went on to relate how he shared this insight with “tens of thousands of his colleagues, and all were convinced.”

The outbreak of the Second Intifada, joining Palestinians and Israeli Arabs in common cause, shocked Israel’s Jews. Suddenly confronted with the fervor of Palestinian nationalism, Israeli Jews began to search once again for a comparable sources of strength to sustain them against the onslaught. The first step was the election of Ariel Sharon over Ehud Barak by a margin almost unprecedented in any functioning democracy. That election ushered in over two decades of right-center governments.

Maariv editor Amnon Dankner issued a mea culpa at the time for himself and his colleagues on the left, who for the previous two decades nurtured a “large and thriving industry of hate, scorn, and arrogance to anyone who did not share [our] views: to those of Eastern descent, to those with right-wing ideologies, and especially to the religious nationalists and haredim.”

Dankner confessed that his camp was so filled with empathy for the plight of the Palestinians that it had no empathy left for their fellow Jews — “only pure, unsullied, sulfuric hate.”

While Israel’s Jews eventually awakened from the Oslo delusion, many failed to recognize the source of that delusion in the desire to cast aside any connection their past. Nor did they fully comprehend how that desire on their part had given encouragement to the murderous intentions of those with no belief in the brotherhood of man, except under the flag of Islam.

It is possible that today’s demonstrators, who have taken their eye off the ball of Iran and even heightened internal terrorism, and who see in every separate-seating event in Elad an incipient Iranian theocracy, from which only the High Court can save them, will one day issue apologies along the lines of the late Amnon Dankner. But in the meantime, I expect to hear much more vituperation directed at all those who remind them of the religious heritage of the Jewish People.

The demonstrators are right that Israel would not be nearly so prosperous or secure without their talents. But without some understanding of why the collective existence of the Jewish People is of sufficient importance to be worth fighting and dying for, Israel cannot survive at all.

Nearly two decades ago, Nadav Shragai wrote, in *Ha’aretz* of all places, that the chareidim do more for the State of Israel by maintaining their pure vision of the world historical mission of the Jewish People than they would by serving in the IDF. And that remains no less true today.