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# Ben-Gurion isn't only an airport, Golda more than an ice cream parlor

## A 'conversation' with Zionism's giants on Israel today

• By DAVID BREAKSTONE

**I**ndependence Day 2025. My assignment: On the occasion of Israel's 77th birthday, to reflect on whether Israel today resembles anything close to what the giants of Zionism dreamed it would become.

Still reeling from the tragedy, calamity, and repercussions of Hamas's attack on October 7, I didn't trust myself to do that. Instead, I preferred to invite the deceased to opine on the matter.

Not unsurprisingly, they weren't eager to leave the comfort of their graves – even those turning over in them – to do so, but I did manage to cajole several whom I'd approached to rise to the challenge and join a free-wheeling discussion by Zoom. My questions, their words – genuine quotes spanning 130 years of vision and anticipation.

### On what Israel was meant to become

DB: I'd feel uncomfortable beginning this conversation without noting the 59 hostages who yet again won't be with us to mark Independence Day, as well as the more than 2,000 killed since October 7 to be mourned on Remembrance Day, making it all but impossible for any of us to fully celebrate the occasion. Yet this devastating loss demands that we ask ourselves what sort of state we set out to create, and to consider whether what we have achieved justifies the price we have had to pay.

Ze'ev Jabotinsky, leader of the Revisionist movement, responded with simplicity: "The Jewish state must be such that Jews will be proud of it."

DB: And what would make us so?

Yitzhak Navon, Israel's fifth president, proffered a formulation: "Israel must be a model society – moral, just, and enlightened." Then, looking to the others for their assent, continued, "May we build a society rooted in compassion, a society that has the power to end poverty, violence, political radicalism, and social polarization. A moral, ethical society that will bring us pride, inspire worldwide admiration... and, above all else, wholeheartedly strive for peace."

David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, enthusiastically agreed. "The State of Israel will prove itself not by material wealth, not by military might or technical achievement, but by its moral character and human values."

DB: Dr. Herzl, it sounds as if those who came after you indeed bought into the legacy you bequeathed. Do you recall –

Theodor Herzl didn't need me to finish the question: "I truly believe that even after we possess our land, Zionism will not cease to be an ideal," he declared, quoting from an article he'd penned just four months before his death, "for Zionism includes not only the yearning for a plot of Promised Land legally acquired for our weary people, but also the yearning for ethical and spiritual fulfillment."

DB: Others chimed in as well.



AN AI-GENERATED image of a theoretical Zoom chat with some of the visionaries who helped create modern-day Israel. (David Breakstone)

Ben-Gurion: "The State of Israel will be worthy of its name not only if it knows how to defend itself... but also how to safeguard justice and the rights of man."

Menachem Begin, founder of the Herut and Likud parties and Israel's sixth prime minister: "A nation is not defined by its borders but by its values and its commitment to justice."

Henrietta Szold, pioneer of social justice and founder of the Hadassah Women's Zionist Organization: "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."

Hannah Szenes, poetess and martyr in the struggle for Jewish sovereignty: "When you see injustice, do not turn away. Even silence is a kind of betrayal."

Herzl, repeating what he had proclaimed before the Zionist Congress: "Those of us who today are prepared to hazard our lives for the cause would regret having raised a finger if we were able to organize only a new social system and not a more righteous one."

DB: So, then, are there regrets over having raised that finger? Is the dream –

Golda Meir, Israel's fourth prime minister, interrupted me: "Zionism is not a dream: It is a reality that we are

building every day."

DB: I understand, but still, the question remains, are we at least on the right path? My question generated an uneasy silence.

Begin came to their rescue: "Israel is not a country of perfect people but a country of imperfect people striving to create a perfect society."

### On democracy

DB: All right, then, let's continue with that thought. That perfect society we're supposedly striving to fashion, how important is it that it be a democracy, and are we justified in proudly proclaiming it to be a vibrant one?

Begin leaned in and spoke quietly with an intonation of concern: "We have learned that an elected parliamentary majority can be an instrument in the hands of a group of rulers and act as camouflage for their tyranny."

Chaim Herzog, Israel's sixth president, appeared to share his unease: "Democracy is not measured merely by elections but by the justice of its laws and the equality of its society. The true test of democracy lies not in the rule of the majority but in how it treats its minorities."





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'WE MUST find a way to live not only ►  
next to our neighbors but with them.'  
(Marc Israel Sellem/The Jerusalem Post)



Jabotinsky concurred: "The Jewish state will have to ensure that the minority will not be rendered defenseless. The aim of democracy is to guarantee that the minority, too, has influence on matters of state policy."

DB: Am I hearing, then, that you fear our safeguards of democracy are not as robust as they might be?

Begin, relating to the current debate over judicial reform: "The law of the country should stipulate that the law and the judiciary must be completely autonomous, both on the part of the government toward the judge and on the part of the judge toward the government."

"An independent judiciary is in practice the last citadel of human freedom in our time. As long as this citadel stands, there is hope of stopping the dark wave. But if the citadel of justice were to fall, there would be no savior for man, who would be crushed between the millstones of despotism."

Jabotinsky, expressing concern over attacks on the media: "Today, the test of democracy is freedom of the press: The most liberal constitution is a lie if the press is muzzled; but where the press is free, there is hope, despite defects of the constitution."

#### On social cohesion

DB: These issues you raise, they and so many others are the source of bitter controversy in Israel today. How worried are you about the dissension within our society?

Navon: "That there are differences among us is nothing new. The question is whether we are able to bear different opinions just as we bear different faces. The issue is not whether there will be disagreements between us but how we will manage them. It is our capacity for dialogue across different segments of society that fuels our strength and resilience."

Begin wholeheartedly agreed: "We must always remember that our strength as a nation lies in our unity and our ability to overcome adversity together."

DB: Yet the differences between us are so deep...

Navon: "We must find the way to live not only next to our neighbors but with them. Israel is a complex mosaic of communities, cultures, traditions, and values, where each yearns for recognition of its unique identity and contribution to society. The goals I set for myself were to increase national cohesion... and fortify the sense of partnership between all segments of the population."

#### On fashioning a shared society

DB: Are we talking here only about relations among Jews, or also between Jews and Arabs?

Herzl, referencing the inhabitants of his utopian *Altneuland*, had a clear answer: "Let me tell you that my friend and I do not discriminate between people. We do not ask to what race or religion they belong. One need only be a decent human being. That is all that's important for us."

DB: Including Arabs?

Herzl was adamant in his response: "We shall endeavor to do nothing that might arouse their hostility. We shall not try to dispossess them of their land... we shall

afford them every opportunity to prosper with us."

Jabotinsky was even more explicit: "Zionists of all schools of thought want the best for the Arabs of Eretz Yisrael. We do not want to eject even one Arab from either the left or the right bank of the Jordan River."

DB: Really? Are you not aware of what some are suggesting today – among them, those who claim to honor you?

Jabotinsky appeared infuriated by his followers' betrayal of his manifesto: "If things fare badly for this group of inhabitants, then things will fare badly for the entire country... We want them to prosper both economically and culturally... Equal rights for all Arab citizens must not only be guaranteed, they must also be fulfilled."

Ben-Gurion agreed entirely, sharing an excerpt from the Declaration of Independence he'd helped draft: "We appeal... to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the state on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions."

DB: Truly equal?

Jabotinsky was unequivocal in his response, citing the constitution he had proposed for the state-in-the-making: "In every cabinet where the prime minister is a Jew, the vice-premiership shall be offered to an Arab, and vice versa."

DB: Your thoughts, then, on the recent legislation defining Israel as the "Nation-State of the Jewish People," explicitly stating that "The right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people."

Jabotinsky: "I do not believe that the constitution of any state ought to include special paragraphs explicitly guaranteeing its 'national' character. Rather, I believe that it would be better for the constitution if there were fewer of those kinds of paragraphs. The best and most natural way is for the 'national' character of the state to be guaranteed by the fact of its having a certain majority."

DB: A position inviting debate. But not at the moment. There is so much more to talk about, and we are running out of time. Final thoughts for us to contemplate as we enter our 78th year under the shadow of war?

Golda: "The greatest challenge to leaders and educators is to bring idealism into the picture despite the cloud that hangs over humanity."

DB: At present, we seem to be having trouble enough keeping defeatism at bay.

Navon, agreeing with Golda and chiding me for my cynicism: "The vision of an exemplary society is not an aspiration to be relegated to some far-off utopian future but a necessary condition for our survival today. Our society must be characterized by moral, social, and humanitarian values."

DB: An echo of our Declaration of Independence: "The State of Israel... will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice, and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex..." A good reminder, indeed, of what we set out to do.

Ben-Gurion nodded but sounded a warning: "The test will not be in the declaration but in its implementation."

DB: Agreed. So, how are we doing? Listening to what you have said and looking at Israel today, I fear we have strayed from the course you'd have had us travel on. And in the face of such betrayal, I wonder whether your words from the past can have any meaning for us in the present.

Wondering themselves, the assembled deferred to the youngest among them.

Szenes: "There are stars whose radiance is visible on Earth though they have long been extinct... There are people who have died whose brilliance continues to light the world."

DB: If only we were able to come together sufficiently to open a crack in the darkness of distrust we have created, to let their radiance in, I thought to myself. If only we were able to dim the din of war sufficiently to hear their voices.

And then, not without trepidation, I posed to my guests the most important of questions: "From your vantage point, are we capable of rising to the challenge of fulfilling your expectations, of becoming all you envisioned?"

But before they were able to respond, my 40-minute Zoom call abruptly timed out.

*The writer is currently engaged in establishing the Yitzhak Navon Center for a Shared Society. He previously served as deputy chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive and World Zionist Organization, and was the founding director of the Herzl Museum and Educational Center in Jerusalem. breakstonedavid@gmail.com*