



15.95x29.38	1	עמוד 19	the jerusalem post - front	17/04/2026	97525556-4
בנימין זאב הרצל - בהקשר לציונות - 80790					

: Israel must be more than just the nation-state of the Jewish people

# Israel must be more than just the nation-state of the Jewish people

• By BEN MOLLOV and SHMUEL SANDLER

they created a tension that continues to shape Israeli and Jewish discourse today.

Israel Independence Day is always a time for collective reflection.

We advocate here the idea that “Israel must be more than just the nation-state of the Jewish people.” Such an assertion gains depth when placed alongside the observation sometimes made about China: that it is “a civilization pretending to be a country.”

It goes with Samuel Huntington’s understanding, which highlighted a broader truth about the modern international system. Many states are not merely political entities, but expressions of deep civilizational lineages that long predate the nation-state model. In this light, and endorsing a study by the prominent sociologist S.N. Eisenstadt, Israel can be understood not only as a sovereign state created to ensure the physical security of the Jews, but also as a potential anchor for the renewal and evolution of Jewish civilization in the contemporary era.

Such a vision might provide a new basis of mutual confidence between Diaspora Jews and the Jewish state that has been eroding for a long while. This Jewish civilizational conception is also most germane to Israel’s position and perception in the Middle East, in which it has too often been assigned the role of an alien European entity.

## Civilizational identity and the modern state system

Samuel Huntington’s civilizational framework, though debated, offers a useful lens for thinking about identities that transcend borders. It suggests that beneath the surface of nation-states lie older cultural, religious, and historical continuities that shape global interactions. Applying this lens to the Jewish people reveals a unique situation: a global community with a shared civilizational heritage dispersed across many countries, yet also concentrated in a sovereign state that serves as its cultural and symbolic center.

This dual structure, Israel as a state and the Jewish people as a worldwide civilization, creates a layered identity. It encompasses both the citizens of Israel and the large Jewish communities of the Diaspora, particularly in the United States. The relationship between these communities is not essentially political or demographic; it is civilizational, involving shared texts, values, memories, and spiritual aspirations. This follows the vision of a World Jewish Community as articulated by the eminent political scientist Daniel J. Elazar.

## Early Zionist debates revisited

This broader perspective echoes foundational debates within the Zionist movement founded by Theodor Herzl. One camp emphasized the urgent need for a haven – a political refuge capable of protecting Jews from persecution. This was a state-centered vision, focused on sovereignty, security, and the basic functions of national self-determination. David Ben-Gurion and Ze’ev Jabotinsky, for instance, articulated this approach.

Another camp envisioned Zionism as a civilizational project: the rebirth of Jewish culture, creativity, and prophetic ethical purpose in a modern setting. For these thinkers, the establishment of a state was not an end, but rather a means to enable the flourishing of Jewish civilization fundamentally rooted in the Bible, allowing its highest ideals – often expressed in the aspiration to be “a light unto nations” – to contribute to the broader human community. Ahad Ha’am and Martin Buber were important representatives of this outlook.

These two visions were not mutually exclusive, but

## The present moment: Security and transcendence

Given Israel’s challenging geopolitical environment, it is understandable that public attention significantly centers on immediate security concerns. The responsibilities of governance, defense, and national resilience are unavoidable. Yet, focusing exclusively on these urgent needs risks narrowing the horizon of what Israel is meant to represent.

A civilizational perspective invites a broader understanding of Israel’s role. It suggests that beyond ensuring physical safety, the state can serve as a platform for moral and cultural renewal, ethical exploration, intellectual creativity, and global engagement. It can be a place where ancient spiritual traditions interact with modern challenges, generating new expressions of Jewish thought, art, science, and social vision for the benefit of humanity. This aspect should also apply to Israel, meeting its own challenges of ensuring diversity within unity in its own body politic for the benefit of non-Jews as well as Jews.

## A larger vision for the future

Viewing Israel through a civilizational lens does not diminish its identity as a nation-state; rather, it situates that identity within a deeper historical continuum. It highlights the possibility that Israel can function simultaneously as a sovereign state and as the central node of a global civilization – one that includes both Israelis and Diaspora Jews, each contributing in different ways.

But most importantly, a civilizational vision of the Jewish state may contribute to lowering tension, especially between the American Jewish pluralistic community and the Jewish state.

This perspective also encourages a more expansive understanding of Israel’s purpose. It suggests that the state’s significance lies not only in its capacity to protect, but also in its ability to inspire, to cultivate cultural vitality, and to serve as a meeting point between tradition and modernity. In this sense, the civilizational paradigm offers a way to reconnect with the broader aspirations that animated early Zionist thought, without ignoring the realities of the present.

Finally, the conception of Israel as the basis of a renewed Jewish civilization can help promote a dialogue between the Jewish and Arab-Islamic civilizations rooted in the Middle East. Such encounters were advocated by Samuel Huntington as a means of moderating the “clash of civilizations.”

Much pioneering work has already been accomplished based on the strong similarities in structure and practice between Judaism and Islam, facilitating mutual respect, self-respect, and mutual enrichment through appropriate dialogues and encounters. Such efforts to be expanded upon can become the basis of an eventual reconciliation between Islam and Judaism, which is very much in the spirit of the historic Abraham Accords.

Indeed, the animating cultural spirit of these Accords, which emphasizes the lofty ideals of common ancestry, can be the first building block of a great inter-civilizational encounter in the Middle East.

*Ben Mollov is on the faculty of the Graduate Program in Conflict Management and the School of Communication and heads the Project for the Study of Religion, Culture and Peace at Bar-Ilan University.*

*Shmuel Sandler is president of Emunah-Efrata College, Jerusalem, and professor emeritus of The Sara & Simha Lainer Chair in Democracy and Civility, Bar-Ilan University.*