

Israel, Independence and Imperfection

"Israel was a dream. The only way to keep a dream rosy and intact and unsullied is never to live it out. This is true of everything – travelling, writing a novel, a sexual fantasy. Israel is now a fulfilled dream, one that exceeds the wildest dreams of his parents. The disappointment is not in the nature of Israel but in the nature of dreams...Israel was born not out of one but many dreams, including several conflicting, contradicting and mutually exclusive dreams...Some wanted to renew the days of old, the biblical country, a replica of the Kingdom of David; Others wanted to create a middle class paradise, with central European manners and peace and quiet between 2-4 in the afternoon; Some wished for a replica of Jewish Shtetl in Eastern Europe with all its attributes while others were Marxist Jews who dreamed Stalin would one day visit their Kibbutz and exclaim "bloody Jews! You have done socialism better than we did in Russia" and then die of happiness. Others meanwhile, saw Zionism through the prism of creating a social democratic welfare state.' (Amos Oz)

He [Ben Gurion] was in love with his dream and feared parting from it 'the messianic era is more important than the messiah' he said. 'the minute the Messiah arrives he will cease to be the Messiah. When you can find the Messiah's address in the phone book, he is no longer the Messiah'. At times Ben Gurion seemed to want his dream to come true and to fear it would with almost the same intensity. He wanted to achieve Zionism's goal and feared waking up into the routine of life of the future. He shared this rumination on the Messiah with a group of writers he had summoned to a meeting. He had a tendency to think that his personal dream was one of the great existential questions faced by mankind. (Tom Segev, A State at Any Cost)

1 And they took their journey from Elim, and all the congregation of the children of Israel came unto the wilderness of Tzin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departing out of the land of Egypt. 2 And the whole congregation of the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness; 3 and the children of Israel said to them: 'Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in Egypt, when we sat by the flesh-pots, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger.' (Shemot 16.1-3)

א וַיֵּסְעוּ, מֵאֵילָם, וַיָּבֹאוּ כָּל-עֵדַת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-מִדְבַּר-סִינַי, אֲשֶׁר בֵּין-
אֵילָם וּבֵין סִינַי--בְּחַמְשָׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם לַחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁנִי, לְצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם
מִצְרַיִם. ב וַיְלִינוּ (וַיִּלְוֹנוּ) כָּל-עֵדַת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, עַל-מִשְׁהַ נְעַל-אַהֲרֹן--
בְּמִדְבַּר. ג וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, מִי-יִתֵּן מוֹתֵנוּ בְּיַד-יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם, בְּשִׁבְתֵּנוּ עַל-סֵדֵי הַבָּשָׂר, בְּאֲכָלְנוּ לֶחֶם לְשֹׁבַע: כִּי-הוֹצֵאתָם
אֶתְנוּ אֶל-הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה, לְהַמִּית אֶת-כָּל-הַקְּהָל הַזֶּה בְּרָעַב. {ס}

Why do they want to return to the Egyptian 'fleshpots'?



The Dangers of 'Nowism'

The Jewish people has a great talent for self destruction. We may be the world champions in self destruction. Of course one can accept all the destruction we brought upon ourselves as the will of God and justify it by saying because of 'our sins were we exiled from the land'.... But our talent for self destruction is not God's will. Maybe it is a function of our character – maybe. And I will explain only one element of our gift for self destruction: **our characteristic demand for perfection, for totality**, for squeezing our ideal to its last dregs or to die trying. All or nothing – 'to die or to capture the hilltop' (Shlomo Skulski). But why should I use that reference when I have the poet Bialik in front of me: 'if there is justice, let it be seen at once. / But if, after I am desolated under the heavens, / justice should appear, / let it be destroyed forever' Pure and simple. Not unlike Gush Emunim's drive for 'Redemption Now.' Ladies and Gentlemen, that is the true 'nowism' more so than any Peace Now under the sun. So justice now, or let it be destroyed forever. Either instant Redemption or to hell with Redemption altogether. (Amos Oz, In the Land of Israel)

"Some of them [a group who are becoming an 'important current in American Jewish life'] are diaspora nationalists and what they believe is that Jews are too good for statehood. When you have a state, you have to be brutal, you have to be murderous at times, and that's for the goyim. We are better than that. After two thousand years of statelessness, we have become a cosmopolitan people that has transcended the nation state." (Michael Walzer, 2019 speech at Bar Ilan)

It would, I sense, be somehow scandalous...if the millennia of revelation, of summons to suffering, if the agony of Abraham and Isaac, from Mount Moriah to Auschwitz, had as its last consequence the establishment of a nation state, armed to the teeth, a land of the Mafioso, as are all other lands. 'Normalcy' would be, for the Jew, just another mode of disappearance. (George Steiner Errata. An Examined Life)

עם ישראל יש לו כשרון גדול לחורבן. אנחנו אולי אלופי העולם בחורבן. מובן שהאדם יכול לקבל את כל החורבנות שהמטנו על עצמינו כגזרת שמיים, ולהצדיק עליהם את הדין, ולומר תמיד "מפני חטאנו גלינו אבל הכשרון שלנו לחורבן אינו גזרת – מארצינו." שמים. הוא פרי אופינו, אולי. ועמוד רק על אחד מבין מרכיבי הכשרון לחורבן: **התביעה האופניית לנו לשלמות, לטוטליות**, למיצוי איזה אידיאל עד תומו או עד התנפצות ראשינו אל הכותל. הכל או לא כלום. "למות או לכבוש את ההר" ובעצם, למה לי שלמה סקולסקי כשיש לפני ביאליק: "אם יש צדק, יופיע מיד. אך אם אחרי הישמדי מתחת הרקיע הצדק יופיע, ימוגר-נא כסאו לעד." "חד וחלק. לא בלתי דומה לתביעה של גוש אמונים, "גאולה עכשיו". רבותי, זה "העכשוויזם" האמיתי, והוא "עכשוויסטי" יותר מכל "שלוש עכשיו" שבעולם. או צדק מיד או ימוגר-נא כסאו לעד. או גאולה לאלתר או **ייתי ולא איחמינה" יבוא ואל אחזה בו"**

Intermediate Historical Model & Redemption Dreams

“A single thread runs through the pre-Zionist messianic expectations of the Hatam Sofer, the anti-Zionist messianic expectation of Rabbi Shapira and the messianic Zionist hope of Rabbi Kook: it is the uncompromising demand for utopian perfection...They all maintain a dichotomistic approach (Galut or Redemption), thereby rejecting entirely the more complex option of a partial Jewish revival within history that continuously hovers between the two extremes.” (Aviezer Ravitzky)

One of the things that was clarified for me in the course of writing this book [Like Dreamers] was how central the dream of redemption has been to Zionism — not just to find a secure place for the Jewish people, but the grand dream of transforming human reality. That dream was impelled, was carried by the Kibbutz movement, which was central to the Israeli story up until say the 1970s or the mid-1970s. And then the settler movement became one of the central engines for the direction that Israel moved in after that. You can't understand Israel without understanding the place of the messianic dream in our being. My question is — and really it's an open question for me as well: Could we have achieved what we did without those grandiose dreams? And at the same time, what is the price that we paid for linking politics with messianism in its secular or religious form? Politics and messianism are opposite modes of being. Messianism is the dream of how the world should be, and politics is dealing with the world as it is. And yes, you tinker with it and you try to make the world a little bit better. Politics has to be incremental and messianism has to be transcendent. And when you link utopianism and messianism with politics, the result is at the very least disappointment and at the worst, catastrophe, which is part of the history of the twentieth century. It's also part of our story. And that story isn't over yet. (Yossi Klein HaLevi)

Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World (1)

Giving thanks despite being 'hungry'

The Ministering angels said to the Holy One Blessed be He 'Sovereign of the Universe, it is written in Your law "the great the mighty and the awesome God Who is impartial and takes no bribe (Devarim 10:17). Yet You are partial towards Israel, as it is written "The Lord lifts up his countenance upon you" (Bamidbar 6:26). God replied to them. 'And shall I not lift up my countenance for Israel, seeing that I wrote for them in the Torah "and you shall eat, and be satisfied and bless the Lord your God (Devarim 8:10) and they are particular to say grace is the quantity is but an olive or an egg?' (Berachot 20b)

אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקב"ה: רבשי"ע, כתוב בתורתך אשר לא ישא פנים ולא יקח שחד, והלא אתה נושא פנים לישראל דכתיב ישא ה' פניו אליך? אמר להם, וכי לא אשא פנים לישראל שכתבתי להם בתורה ואכלת ושבעת וברכת את ה' אלהיך, והם מדקדקים על עצמם עד כזית ועד כביצה".

Jews have always distinguished themselves from Christians precisely in that they taught their sons and daughters to find **positive religious meaning even in a pre-messianic world**; to search it out even in a historical reality that has not yet been saved. Of course they will say, the partial achievement can eventually lead to the perfect one, step by step. But this does not detract from the innate value of the part in itself. Historical time is not to be judged only from the perspective of eschatological time. (Aviezer Ravitzky)

Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World (2)

Understanding the role of time in historical processes

Nothing in this narrative is as simple as linear time. There is no guarantee of progress....there is no historical inevitability – that modern idea which, as Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin remind us, has been the source of so much brutality and bloodshed in the modern world. ‘Progress’ like every other false god has called forth the blood of human sacrifice in abundance...The modern world was formed through four revolutions: the British, the American, the French and the Russian. Two - the British and the American - led to a slow but genuine transformation towards democracy, universal franchise, and respect for human dignity. The French and Russian revolutions, however, led to regimes that were even worse than those they replaced. The difference was that the British and American revolutions, led by the Puritans, were inspired by the Hebrew Bible. The French and Russian revolutions were inspired by philosophy: Rousseau’s in the first, Karl Marx’s in the second. The Tenakh understands the role of time in human affairs. Change is slow and evolutionary. Philosophy lacks that understanding of time and tends to promote revolution. [Philosophy as political ideology constantly holds forth the promise of a shortcut to utopia]. What makes revolutions fail is the belief that by changing structures of power, you can change human behavior. There is some truth in this, but also a significant falsehood. Political change can be rapid. Changing human nature is very slow indeed. It takes generations, even centuries and millennia. (Jonathan Sacks)

Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World (3)

Take Smaller Bites

Perhaps it was a lunatic promise: to turn, in the space of two or three generations, masses of Jews, persecuted, frightened, full of love-hate toward their countries of origin into a nation that would be an example for the Arab community, a model of salvation for the entire world. Perhaps we bit off too much. Perhaps there was, on all sides, a latent messianism. A messiah complex. Perhaps we should have aimed for less. Perhaps there was a wild pretension here, beyond our capabilities - beyond human capabilities. Perhaps we must limit ourselves and forgo the rainbow of messianic dreams, whether they be called 'the resurrection of the Kingdom of David and Solomon' or 'the building of a model society, a Light unto the Nations' 'fulfillment of the vision of the Prophets' to 'to become the heart of the world'. Perhaps we should take smaller bites, relinquish the totality of the land for the sake of internal and external peace. Concede heavenly Jerusalem for the sake of the Jerusalem of the slums, waive messianic salvation for the sake of prosaic sobriety...

What does one find in the autumn of 1982? Not the 'land of the heart' and not the 'divine city reunited' as the clichés would have it, but simply the State of Israel. Not the 'Maccabeans reborn' that Herzl talked of, but a warm hearted, hot tempered Mediterranean people that is gradually learning, through great suffering and in a tumult of sound and fury, to find release both from the bloodcurdling nightmares of the past and from delusions of grandeur, both ancient and modern; gradually learning to cling to what it has managed to build here over the course of one hundred difficult years... All those who secretly long for the charms of Paris or Vienna, for the Jewish shtetl, or for heavenly Jerusalem; do not cut loose from those longings for what are we without our longings? But let's remember that Ashdod is what there is. And she is not quite the grandiose fulfillment of the vision of the Prophets and of the dream of generations; not quite a world premiere, but simply a city on a human scale. If only we try to look at her with a calm eye, we will surely not be shamed or disappointed. (Amos Oz)

Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World (4)

Remember present: celebrate ideal

Many Jewish holidays involve celebrating a core, unconstrained experience - even in the face of the knowledge that that experience is limited, or in the face of realities which conflict with the experience. Think of Passover and the celebration of freedom when we know the Israelites are far from their destination, and celebrated by Jews throughout our history when they were anything but free...Holidays are the opportunity to concentrate an ideal in its extreme articulation, the moments when we pause from realities to acknowledge the importance of dreams.

Yom Haatzmaut must be the same: the moment when - in the face of major challenges to Israel's reality - we acknowledge the unique and extraordinary ideals that underlie Israel's founding and its continued thriving...amidst a sometimes painful, doubtlessly evolving, and increasingly important public Jewish conversation about Israel and its meaning for contemporary Jewry - I am pausing to note just how extraordinary this moment actually is. The Jewish people, thanks to the gift of the State of Israel, are engaged in a conversation truly not possible before 1948: a conversation about what Jewishness should mean inside and outside a sovereign framework, and one that is not just about aspirations and ideals but is tested on a daily basis, a conversation about ideals with implications for realities. This is Jewish history in the making...and whether or not we feel today that we know all the answers, it is this ideal reality that we should be celebrating today. (Yehuda Kurtzer, Jewish History in the Making)

If He had brought us out of Egypt, and not executed justice upon the Egyptians, Dayenu
If He had brought us to Mount Sinai and not given us the Torah, Dayenu
If He had given us the Torah and not brought us into the land, Dayenu

אלו הוציאנו ממצרים ולא עשה בהם שפטים דינו :
אלו קרבנו לפני הר סיני ולא נתן לנו את התורה דינו
אלו נתן לנו את התורה ולא הכניסנו לארץ ישראל דינו



Additional Sources

Shin, now 24, was a political prisoner by birth. From the day he was born in 1982 in Camp No. 14 in Kaechon until he escaped in 2005, Shin had known no other life. Guards beat children, tortured grandparents and, in cases like Shin's, executed family members. But Shin said it did not occur to him to hate the authorities. He assumed everyone lived this way...Shin is the first North Korean who came south who is known to have escaped from a prison camp. Moreover, he was confined to a "total-control zone."

Shin "is a living example of the most brutal form of human rights abuse," said Yoon Yeo Sang, president of Database Center for North Korean Human Rights in Seoul, where Shin is taking temporary shelter. "He comes from a place where people are deprived of their ability to have the most basic human feelings, such as love, hatred and even a sense of being sad or mistreated." Now in Seoul, he said he **sometimes finds life "more burdensome than the hardest labor in the prison camp, where I only had to do what I was told."** His limited vocabulary has caused him to fail twice the written driver's license test. And there is his struggle to reconcile with his dead mother. Shin said he sometimes wished he could return to the time before he learned about the greater world, "without knowing that we were in a prison camp, without knowing that there was a place called South Korea." (Born and raised in a North Korean gulag, New York Times)

"The concept of 'messianism', almost always used in conjunction with that of 'utopia' has accompanied the Zionist movement from its earliest days. On the one hand, messianism is seen as a kind of demiurge inspiring great changes and summoning up irrational but creative strengths. Drawing its power from the very depths of the nation's past, it confronts the present with the challenge of a golden age. On the other hand, the messianic force is also treated as dangerous in the extreme, and the mere use of the term is often meant to serve as a warning against the seductive fascination of unrestrained forces and empty visions.... In sum, the term messianism increasingly became a synonym for fantasy, that is lacking political realism." Yaacov Shavit – Realism and Messianism in Zionism and the Yishuv

there is a yearning for revolution in Judaism: Gershom Scholem characterized this voice in his beautiful article, "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism," in which he claims that within the Jewish religion, there is a recurring theme of yearning for renewal of the world, for the apocalypse. This is an authentic revolutionary voice that repeats itself in different ways throughout Jewish history. (Menachem Loberbaum)