

Saving graces

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Saving Israel: How the Jewish People Can Win a War That May Never End

By Daniel Gordis

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Daniel Gordis's important new book, *Saving Israel*, calls for nothing short of reinventing modern Zionism. For without such a reinvention, the very continuance of the Zionist enterprise is in mortal danger. Gordis makes clear that what is at stake is not just the perpetuation of the Jewish state, but the very existence of the Jewish people.

The results of two studies in the twin pillars of modern Jewish life, one in Israel, the other in America, reveal how serious matters have gotten. When asked if the destruction (mind you, the destruction, not the gradual withering away) of Israel would be a personal tragedy for them, an astounding 50 percent of Jewish Americans under the age of younger than 35 said it would not. The other alarming study result is that 50% of Israeli schoolchildren apparently do not know who Theodor Herzl was.

Hard as this is for some of us to believe, these statistics reflect an increasing trend of alienation from millennial Zionist aspirations as well as a growing ignorance of basic Jewish history, both modern and ancient. Gordis points to the poetry of pre-state Zionists like Natan Alterman and Haim Bialik, noting that while they criticized and challenged the biblical ethos of the Jews, they were steeped in the richness of those sacred texts and in the history of our people.

Sophisticated works like Alterman's "The Silver Platter" or Bialik's "In the City of Slaughter," while rebukes of the old order, called for the creation of a "new Jew" and reflected their authors' prodigious knowledge of Jewish history. Today, many an Israeli is ambivalent about his or her army service, is hard pressed to explain why he should pay exorbitant taxes and live by the social dictates of what he considers medieval religious fanatics, and wonders aloud about the merits of or need for a Jewish state. Too many of these Israelis, warns Gordis, no longer believe in a Zionist ethos in large part because they have lost the connection to their roots in Jewish life. Gordis is talking about Jewish identity and Jewish history, not necessarily Jewish religious life, an important subject he tackles in other chapters.

To make matters worse, all this disaffection and disconnection come at a time when Israel is facing external threats from implacable enemies like Hizbullah, Hamas and Iran, enemies with demonic designs against the Jewish state. The "euphoric" Oslo years, when peace was deemed around the corner, have given way to suicide bombings, unrelenting missile and rocket attacks, soldier

kidnappings, successive proxy wars against Iranian sponsored terrorists and no signs that these threats will be eradicated any time soon. Without a deep and abiding sense of purpose, which can only come from a profound belief in Jewish rootedness in Zion, including a belief in the justness and rightness of the Zionist project, no one in their right mind would continue making the kind of sacrifices called for in Israel.

If the goal is to be just another "normal" country in the family of nations, Zionism - read, Israel - is destined to fail, according to Gordis. In the chapter "Not Just a Hebrew-Speaking America," he describes why the America ideal is a dangerous model for a country with very different goals, living a very different reality in a very different neighborhood. Gordis argues that the normality that Israelis have long yearned for is impossible to attain and not even desirable. "For normalcy as a goal will not breed the kind of distinctiveness that Israeli survival will require. If Israelis cannot articulate anything profound about Jewish civilization, or say anything about the grandest ideas that have long been at the core of Jewish life, what possible reason could there be to continue to defend a Jewish country?"

Gordis's writing is at its strongest and most cogent when he discusses the imperatives of that defense. He explores the uncomfortable history of our people in relation to power, and then makes a compelling case for Israel's prosecution of an unending series of moral wars. It's impossible to write a serious book about modern Israel's relationship to political and military power today without referring to Ruth Wisse's recent seminal work on the subject, *Jews and Power*, and Gordis continues where she left off. Wisse examined our inclination to give greater weight to our moral behavior than to the exigencies of survival, a tendency she characterized as "moral solipsism."

GORDIS RECONSIDERS Jewish power and our uneasy relationship to its use in his chapter, "The Wars That Must Be Waged." He goes back to both biblical injunctions ("blot out the memory of Amalek" - Deuteronomy 25:17-19; Saul's failure to obey the commandment to obliterate the enemy; "I [Samuel] will not go back with you; for you have rejected the Lord's command, and the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel" - 1 Samuel 15:26); and biblical/historical accounts of just wars waged by the Jewish people. Gordis reexamines the story of Hanukka and the centrality of the military victory the Jews won over their adversaries. The real miracle was that a small band, led by the Maccabees, was able to overcome the much larger and more powerful Greek forces and regain control of the Temple and Jerusalem.

Hanukka was originally a military victory celebration. Initial eyewitness accounts spoke of victory celebrations lasting for eight days, without an emphasis on the "miracle" of enduring flames from oil. In more recent times, the poet Aharon Ze'ev wrote a children's song, "We Bear Torches," insisting that a miracle did not happen to us, but rather people, with their courage and their might, wrought the miracle ("we chiseled away the stone until we bled").

Another illustration of our discomfort with the exercise of power comes from a midrash retelling the part of the Passover story where God chastises his angels for reveling in song, while the Egyptian army perished in pursuit of the fleeing Hebrews. (B. *Megilla* 10b) "The work of My hands is being drowned in the sea, and you would chant hymns?" But there is another midrash that is cited far less frequently. In this one, God reprimands the angels, saying, "My troops are in distress, and you would sing to me?" (Exodus Rabba 23:7). A very different message, suggesting that there are battles that must be fought and won, unavoidably shedding blood.

Clearly, many Jews today, including some Israelis, subscribe to the credo that war and the use of force is "un-Jewish." This is particularly so for Western Jews, especially those who've been raised in the comfort and safety of America. Many have a visceral aversion to war, are committed to the principles

of pacifism and find themselves at odds with Israel's military actions.

Gordis concludes that the pacifist option would lead to national suicide of the Jewish people. Nonviolence is a luxury that we can ill afford. Instead, he suggests that we defend ourselves when necessary, "occasionally using massive force, with all the ambivalence that that inevitably arouses." We should embrace the often ignored Jewish tradition's understanding that the use of military might is sometimes a necessity (in fact, Jewish law has an entire category of war, *milhemet mitzva*, "commanded wars," or wars that must be waged), and in certain circumstances, the only thing that will keep us alive in an increasingly hostile world.

In other chapters, Gordis explores pressing issues facing Israel today, including the rising tensions between Israeli Arabs (who now prefer the moniker Palestinian-Israelis) and Israeli Jews, and those between secular Jewish Israelis (as well as more moderately observant Jews) and the haredim, or ultra-Orthodox. He poses unsettling questions that have been unasked for too long and raises politically incorrect propositions, not as dogma, but as a beginning for constructive dialogues.

Among those questions: "How should Israel balance its democratic principles with the sense that something should be Jewish about the country? But who should decide what that something is? And what are the rights of those who disagree? Should all Israeli schoolchildren study the Bible and some religious content? To what extent should Israel's Arabs be required to study the Hebrew Bible, or classic works of Zionist literature? Should Jewish Israelis also study the Koran?" And how can Israel's growing Arab population be more integrated into Israeli society, with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities of citizenship, with the inherent tensions as a minority in a Jewish state, with that state engaged in ongoing belligerencies with fellow Arab states?

RATHER THAN providing the answers, Gordis suggests that the best way forward is to allow these questions to percolate in the free marketplace of ideas. He recommends restoring Judaism to the heart of Israel's national debate. Included in that Judaism is not just religion but Jewish history and Jewish tradition. It should be no more the sole province of the ultra-religious haredim than staunchly secular Israelis. The challenge is to foster dynamic and creative debates in the Zionist public square about what the Jewish state should be, and why it matters to have a Jewish state in the first place.

Gordis cautions that our greatest strengths can prove to be our greatest weaknesses (and undoing). We are by nature a self-reflective and self-critical people, and this has served us well (note how after the debacle of the IDF's performance in the Second Lebanon War, stock was taken, leaders were dismissed and the army restored its fighting prowess and morale). We must not let that healthy tendency veer into self-flagellation and worse, self-loathing. This can be seductive to some, when peace seems more distant than ever. It must be one party's fault, goes the reasoning, and since the Palestinians are increasingly seen by the world as the victim, then the fault must lie with the Jews.

These are not easy tasks. Jews the world over will need intellectual and moral fortitude to withstand the avalanche of criticisms, attacks and vilifications that do not relent, as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shows no signs of resolving in the near future. And Israelis will increasingly need to gird their loins as well, for the likelihood is that their children will continue to be called to the battlefield. Courage, resolve and commitment will be needed. This can only happen with a renewed sense of purpose, a redefining of what the Zionist enterprise is all about and why it matters to not just Israelis, but Jews all over the world.

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[[Back to the Article](#)]

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