

GORDIS'S THIRTEEN ARTICLES OF FAITH

By Joshua Teitelbaum

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Daniel Gordis, *Saving Israel: How the Jewish People Can Win a War That May Never End*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2009. 262 pages

Reviewed by Dr. Joshua Teitelbaum

This is not going to be your standard academic book review. It can't be, because although Gordis's book has much of the academic visage (an academic publisher, references, etc.), it is a very personal book. And a remarkable one.

To some extent we all write from a personal place. Daniel Gordis's place is that of an American Jew whose commitment to the Jewish people has drawn him to make his home in Israel.

Gordis made aliya in 1998; I came in 1981, but no matter how long we have been here, we *olim* are simultaneously insiders and outsiders. We are outsiders because we were not born here and for the most part came as adults, following a conscious, purposeful decision. We maintain a strong connection to our place of birth through family, culture, and frequent visits, and we consider ourselves patriotic Americans. We are proud of our origins, proud to come from a place that has given so much to the world (and to the Jews) and is, with few exceptions, thoroughly admired. We are reminded every day what we have given up by coming here, just as we are reminded why we did so -- and that we have gained so much more.

At the same time, we are insiders: we live and work here, fight traffic, curse the banks and insurance companies, travel the land, cry on *Yom HaZikaron* (Memorial Day) and rejoice on *Yom HaAzmaut* (Independence Day). We serve in the IDF and our children have followed us - and we are especially proud of them. This duality gives us a singular perspective on our adopted country.

Gordis's talents as a writer and as participant-observer provide us with a caring, angst-driven, yet sober analysis of Israel's current malaise. That he is both an outsider and an insider enables him to provide unique insights into Israel's current situation. Aspects of what he describes have been and are discussed in the Israeli public sphere, but the type of comprehensive discussion proposed by Gordis is one that we are not having, at least not in the scope he proposes.

By all accounts, Zionism has triumphed. The creation of modern Israel is a truly amazing success story. The Jewish people, demonized, dehumanized and persecuted for centuries, have risen from what might have been the dustbin of history to take back - in the face of impossible odds -- their right of national self-determination. So one would think that Israelis might be happily resting on their laurels and basking in the political and economic accomplishments that have followed. Peace may not be imminent, but given the constant threats, Israel has done pretty well.

Yet today, the Israeli intellectual classes are terribly cynical and self-denigrating. In Gordis's words - self-loathing. This is particularly acute in academia, where the complaining never ceases and Israel can seem to do nothing right. To be sure, Israel is not perfect and there is much to criticize, but too often the entire Zionist project, the very existence of the state as the state of the Jewish people is challenged.

Gordis chronicles the rise of Israeli self-confidence following the victory of the 1967 war, the euphoria, the concessions of Oslo, and the ensuing disappointment when Palestinians failed to respond to Barak's generous offer at Camp David in 2000, choosing instead to launch a terrorist war against Israel. Even the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza brought only more Palestinian violence, as the Palestinians chose to attack Israel instead of building the foundations for a state. Many Israelis came to believe that the issue no

[1] Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), p. 116.

longer was one of territories, but rather of the Jewish state's very existence, as it continued to face threats by Hamas (Israel had withdrawn from Gaza), from Hizballah (Israel had withdrawn from Lebanon), and from a soon-to-be-nuclear Iran (Israel had no border dispute with Tehran). "What was at stake was the future of the Jewish state," writes Gordis, "nothing more, nothing less. And that future seemed much less certain than it had just four decades earlier." (p. 6)

From the former head of the Jewish Agency to prominent members of academe, some Israeli intellectuals have come out against the idea of the Jewish state, and in the case of Tel Aviv University's former Trotskyist Shlomo Sand, even [against the existence of a Jewish people](#). Furthermore, these arguments are advanced by Israel's enemies overseas, from the far left to Islamists, from Jews and from non-Jews. Many of these naysayers are covered in the book.

The national malaise is a real one. It is palpable. We don't always know how to articulate why we are here. There is a lack of an appropriate connection to the Jewish past, to Jewish texts, to the Holocaust and a general lack of appreciation for the sacrifices made by previous generations. Particularly among young people, Israelis are in a sense victims of their own success. In a globalized world, they can be anywhere, so why stay here? Gordis asks the question that needs to be asked (and answered!): In the absence of peace, and in the face of constant delegitimizing, why is preserving Israel worth the effort and the blood? Why persevere if the price of maintaining the state is so high?

Asking this kind of question might strike many Israelis as strange. For them, the existence of Israel today is a given -- it is taken for granted. Americans don't ask why America should exist, and the French don't ask why France should exist. They just do. The same Israelis might add that only a Jew born in the Diaspora would ask such a question.

But this is Gordis' advantage. It is the Diaspora perspective, combined with a familiarity with Israel that helps him formulate the question. It is the participant-observer in him that allows him to marvel at Israel's accomplishments while being deeply concerned for its future.

Gordis's book is a call for a national *discussion* of Israel's sense of purpose. He hopes that it will result in a new articulation of that purpose. In a sense, Israelis are already beginning that conversation, but Gordis has a unique formulation of why we *need* this kind of public debate.

Through thirteen chapters, whether consciously or subconsciously channeling Maimonides' [Thirteen Principles of Faith](#), Gordis lays out his. He begins by articulating why Jews need a state, and then proposes parameters for a discussion.

For Gordis, Zionism is so much more than the "expression of our being fed up with being ruled by Goyim," as famously formulated by one of Israel's most profound religious thinkers, Yeshayahu Leibowitz. [\[1\]](#) It offers the possibility of Jewish recovery and Jewish flourishing, as Jews. Of course, Jews also need a state, because the state of Israel gives Jews hope of a better future after centuries of persecution, which culminated in the ultimate horror of the Holocaust.

If Jews have returned to history as a people in their own right, not as a hyphenated ethnic group, it is only through the existence of the state of Israel. As actors in history, Jews are making decisions for themselves, and making them in the context of Jewish sovereignty, where Jews have *responsibility* for their decisions. Statehood entails a revitalization of national character that cannot be accomplished in the Diaspora. To this end, Israel has revived the national language of the Jews, Hebrew, although Israeli Jews are in danger of making that a shallow accomplishment, as so many are painfully unaware of the Jewish texts and contexts on which the Hebrew language draws. Israel embodies the accomplishment of the Jews as a nation, with a thriving economy, a health system admired worldwide (pay attention, Barack Obama!), and universities that are the envy of many. And all this in the face of existential military threats. Should Israel disappear, argues Gordis, it is unlikely that the Jewish people could recover.

[\[1\]](#) Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), p. 116.

But these accomplishments now face still greater threats: Even after Oslo and withdrawals from Lebanon (2000) and Gaza (2005), anti-Semitism and calls for Israel's destruction ring out every day from the Arab world and [Iran](#). Iran is on its way to having a nuclear weapon. Israel's Arabs present a unique challenge, as they challenge Israel as the national project of the Jews. (Gordis devotes two chapters to Israeli Arabs.) Israelis thus live with great physical uncertainty, but that uncertainty (and living here) can be made easier and more meaningful if Israel recovers its national sense of purpose. The recovery of purpose must therefore be made a national goal.

"The critical question for the future of Israel," writes Gordis, "is whether Israel and Zionism can wean themselves from their addiction to self-loathing without losing the ability for self-criticism that is key to any moral and constantly improving society." (p. 123). Israelis will have to "learn that simply because the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot now be settled does not mean that Zionism is the cause of the conflict." (p. 123)

Gordis's main point is that we need to have a discussion, but in getting to that point he also addresses some key differences between the American project and the Jewish one in Israel. In his chapter "More than Just a Hebrew-Speaking America," Gordis provides some of the most unique insights in the book. Through a trenchant comparison of founding documents, he clearly demonstrates that while America has inspired much of the Israeli project, each country had a different founding ethos. America was about freedom as defined by breaking away from an undemocratic monarchy, designed to end "the long train of abuses and usurpations" as stated in the Declaration of Independence, while Israel's Declaration of Independence is based on the land of Israel "as the birthplace of the Jewish people." For American Jews, for whom the Zionist idea has never fully taken root, this distinction needs to be fully understood and internalized.

And Israeli Jews concerned about Israel as both a Jewish and democratic state should understand, as Gordis put it, that while democracy and individual rights must be a part of Israel, they are not at the "foundation of what makes Israel unique." (p. 138, Gordis's emphasis.) If Israelis were to seek only those values, they could surely find them elsewhere. But the Zionist project is about so much more than that.

Zionism sought to create a "new Jew," a strong Jew who could defend himself or herself and be creative outside the bounds of a religion that had become hobbled by an obsession with the minutiae of Jewish law. This was a revolution and one that could only be carried out under Jewish sovereignty. But the price of this revolution, contends Gordis, was extraordinarily high, since in the process of rejecting much of the Jewish past, Israelis also rejected the key to the Jewish future, which rests on drawing on the rich cultural and political heritage of Judaism. The challenge then, is to reconceive and, if possible, reformulate the vision of the new Jew.

To accomplish this, Diaspora Jews in particular must be weaned from an addiction to pacifism. Pacifism is not a Jewish value, although working for peace definitely is. Defending Israel is about Jews assuming responsibility for their own safety, just as it is about remaining as decent and as compassionate as possible while doing so. It is about national responsibility.

This idea was particularly trenchant for me. I still marvel at the sight of a Jewish soldier, at an Israeli Air Force jet fighter with the Star of David on its wings as it [flies over Auschwitz](#). Although past the age of service, I still volunteer for reserve duty, since I want to be part of the Jewish "Don't Tread on Me" effort. I revel in my children's military service, and am fiercely proud of them.

Gordis's call for a national discussion is well timed. In fact, this discussion has begun, and to a great extent Gordis's book (once translated into Hebrew and appropriately adapted for an Israeli audience) is part of that discussion. There are many exciting initiatives underway that come to mind. In the realm of education, the [Meytarim](#) network of schools is growing, but not nearly fast enough. Instead of the standard separation between religious and secular Jews in the state school system, Meytarim is a pluralistic system, involving all kinds of Jews, with a heavy dose of Jewish studies. The pre-army

[1] Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), p. 116.

preparatory programs for religious and non-religious Jews are growing. These programs are precisely what Gordis wants: they prepare our children by teaching them what they are fighting for.

In higher education, The [Shalem Center](#) (where Gordis is senior vice president and senior fellow) is on its way to establishing Shalem College, which will be Israel's first liberal arts college and which promises to create a new generation of leaders prepared to engage in the development of the ideas crucial to a national discussion about Israel's future.

Many non-religious Jewish study programs, such as [Kolot](#) and [Alma](#), take a non-traditional approach to Jewish texts, but engage in a dialogue with the sources. An excellent magazine, [Eretz Acheret](#), edited by Bambi Sheleg and Naama Cifrony, explores aspects of Israel society from Jewish identity to social justice. In the field of social entrepreneurship, Ariel Beery and Aaron Horowitz are revolutionizing Jewish non-profits in incredibly innovative ways through the [Presentense Group](#). In Diaspora Israel education, Yitzhak Mansdorf is educating young Orthodox women about all sides of the conflict in order to make them [better activists on behalf of Israel](#). Many other such innovative initiatives are getting underway.

Perhaps the most overlooked place where Israelis are engaging in a discussion about Judaism in Israel is in the music scene. For many years now, musicians [Ehud Banai](#), [Evyatar Banai](#), [Meir Banai](#), [Shuli Rand](#), [the Alma ensemble](#), [Kobi Oz](#), and many more are engaging with Jewish texts and ideas in a hugely creative outburst. If in the past many Israelis were sadly unaware of the Hebrew textual sources of much of their modern language, these musicians are reacquainting Hebrew-speaking Jews with the riches of their forgotten heritage.

Europe is in a post-national phase, whereas a country like Israel, to quote Tony Judt, is an "anachronism." While several decades ago one heard that "Jews were too clannish," today Jews in Israel are told to give up their myopic Zionism and become more universalist in their approach. My suggestion to those nations who would have us abandon Jewish national self-determination is: you go first (the Palestinians, maybe, or the Swedes?). If there is any people that needs a national framework, it is the Jews

For we still seek security and comfort in our corporate and national identity as Jews. This is the framework in which we choose to define and carry out our own identity, to flourish and develop as a people amongst the nations, using our national language. This is Zionism and this is Jewish national self-determination -- a right of all peoples. We hope and pray that the nations of the world will allow us to carry out our national project. And we pray to do it in peace with our Palestinian neighbors, who also deserve self-determination, but not at our expense.

And as we Jews continue the work-in-progress that is our national project, we should reappropriate the term *Zionism*. Zionism is the ideology of Jewish national self-determination. The term has fallen into disuse by Israeli and American Jews who are embarrassed by it since it has been appropriated by our enemies and wrongly infused with a negative meaning. So let's take it back and use it. Let's recapture the discourse.

Gordis's book should be read by anyone concerned about Israel's future. He moves us to begin this discussion. And in so doing, we should ponder the moving words of Israeli Nobel Laureate S.Y. Agnon as [he accepted the prize for literature](#) in 1965: "As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the Exile. But always I regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem." Better yet -- the more down-to-earth words of Walter Sobchak: "[If you will it, Dude, it is no dream.](#)"

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[1] Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), p. 116.