

Ben-Gurion's Farewell Address

David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973), the first prime minister of the State of Israel, was the leader of the Zionist movement from the late 1930s into the first decades of statehood. More than any other individual, he left a mark on the patterns and ideas of the Jewish state that is still felt in almost all areas of public life, from basic notions of security, to relations between secular and religious Jews, to the continued dedication of Israel's resources to the encouragement and absorption of Jewish immigration.

Throughout a tumultuous political career spanning seven decades, from the first years of the twentieth century, when he was a Zionist activist in Plonsk, until his resignation from the Knesset in 1970, a single subject always headed his concerns: The spiritual and political fate of the Jewish nation. Ben-Gurion's political and diplomatic activity, his writings and his thought, all return time and again to the question of how to ensure Israel's survival and growth, both physical and spiritual.

In 1971, Ben-Gurion was invited to address a special session of the Knesset in honor of his eighty-fifth birthday. In this address, Ben-Gurion offered a public and sweeping expression of his thought on the future of Israel. On this occasion, freed from partisan considerations, Ben-Gurion took a last look at the Zionist undertaking and its future, in the course of which he outlined the principles and aims which he felt should guide the State of Israel in the decades to follow.

As I will be addressing the principal issue of “the future,” and particularly now that I have left the government, I will not take exception with what I have heard tonight and elsewhere—and there is much with which to take exception. In the main, I will speak of the future.

The Jewish people is among the world’s most ancient peoples. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, China and others did come to exist before Israel did, and in the sciences they also preceded Israel. In only one particular does the Jewish people differ from all other peoples: That Israel’s nationality and its faith are intertwined. They have been since the beginning of our people, and so they are today. The French, the Germans, the Japanese, the Arabs and the members of any other nation need not all share the same faith. A German can be either Catholic or Protestant, as can an Englishman or a Frenchman. A Japanese can be Shinto or Buddhist or Christian. An Arab can be Muslim or Christian. A Jew, however, cannot be a member of another faith and still be a Jew. A Jew can be an atheist, but if he adopts the Christian or Muslim faith—he is no longer a Jew.

This is not to say that no changes have taken place in the life of the Jewish people. Those who left Egypt and wandered in the desert were different from those who conquered Canaan and its inhabitants; the people who separated into different tribes in the days of the judges differed from the people who united under the rule of the first three kings; the nation that was unified under one king did not resemble the nation that split in two after Solomon’s death, establishing the kingdoms of Judea and Israel; and there is a great distinction between the people during the time of the first kings of Judea and Israel and the people during the reigns of Uzziah and Jeroboam ben Joash, when the great biblical prophets—Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah—appeared.

Nor during all the periods I have mentioned did the Jewish people resemble at all the people who returned from enslavement in the days of Zerubabel, Ezra and Nehemiah, and the founding of the Second Temple; there is a tremendous difference between the period of Persian rule and that

of the Greeks and Hasmoneans, and the later period of the Herods and the Romans; and we still have not exhausted the list of dramatic changes over the course of the nation's history. After the destruction of the Second Temple came the great revolts of Bar-Kochba, which ended in defeat and more than eighteen hundred years of alienation and wandering; generations of punishing decrees and persecutions, of apostasy and forced conversion in Christian and Muslim lands, of roaming from country to country and from language to language. There was the compulsory adaptation, time and again through the ages, to changed and changeable living conditions, spiritual climates, and political and economic frameworks in all the lands of the diaspora, to the four corners of the earth. And through all the successive trials and hardships, which have yet to end, the constant "I" of our people was preserved, no less than the national "I" of settled peoples who remained firmly joined to their lands.

We are now approaching the quarter-century mark of the revival of the Jewish state in our ancient homeland. In recent days we have watched other peoples exchange slavery for freedom, in Europe, Asia and Africa. India, Burma and Ceylon came into their own at almost the exact same moment as the State of Israel. Yet everyone understands the fundamental distinction between these states and the revival of Israel. The peoples of India, Burma and Ceylon dwelt in their own lands all along, while foreign invaders conquered them from time to time. Once they rid themselves of foreign rule, they achieved their independence. Not so Israel. Nor is the rebirth of Israel similar to the birth of the United States, Canada, Australia or the countries of Latin America. These lands were "rediscovered" by voyager-conquerors: Spanish, Portuguese, British and others. The European metropolis dispatched emigrants who were to settle these countries, by eradicating the original inhabitants or not. Once the settlers reached a given stage in development they broke with the mother country, whether by force or by agreement, to stand on their own.

The State of Israel was re-established in a land where Arabs had dwelt for some fourteen hundred years, and it was surrounded on the north, east

and south by Arab lands and regimes. The land itself was wasted and impoverished, its standard of living far below that in the countries the Jews left in order to return to the Land of Israel, to renew its Hebrew population. In 1918, at the end of World War I, the land held fewer than sixty thousand Jews, equaling less than one-tenth the number of non-Jewish inhabitants. Yet, a little over twenty-three years ago, a Jewish state was established in this land whose Jewish population is growing constantly.

Something else happened as well: The Hebrew language, which over the course of two thousand years had almost disappeared from the mouths of the Jewish people, was resurrected and became the spoken and literary language in a resurgent Israel. Such an event is unprecedented in the history of language. We are aware of the tremendous efforts the state of Ireland invested over many decades to revive the Gaelic language, yet all its efforts were for naught, even though the Irish people dwelt continuously in its land. And this people, which has yet to free itself from its deep hatred for England, continues to speak the English tongue.

And a third thing happened in our land: In Israel, the Jews made a fundamental change in their economic lifestyle. They returned to tilling the soil, and to all the other occupations a people pursues in its own land.

What, then, is the meaning of this miraculous political, cultural and economic phenomenon, unparalleled in human history? The deep human connection to the ancient homeland of Israel and to the Hebrew language—the language of the Book of Books whose like does not exist in the world, which has been translated into more than 1,400 tongues—these are the deep, hidden wellsprings from which the dispersed people of Israel drew the moral and emotional strength in exile to withstand the centuries-long hardships of life in foreign lands, and to continue until the advent of the national redemption. Whoever does not regard the vision of redemption, of Jewish and universal redemption, as one of the primary distinguishing features of the nation, does not see the basic truth of Jewish history and the cornerstone of Jewish belief.

In the consciousness of the Jewish people—in its religious, ethical and national consciousness—embedded elements that are unique to the Hebrew nation became fused inextricably with human-cosmic elements which transcend all national frameworks, because they take in the world and everything in it. The supreme expression of this fusion is the vision of redemption. The deepest aspiration of the people's prophets and teachers was a complete national redemption in the chosen land. This aspiration, however, was not limited to what concerned the Jewish people only. Rather, it heralded the advent of peace and justice and equality for all peoples: A perfect redemption of humanity and the eradication of malice and tyranny from the universe.

In envisioning redemption, the prophets of Israel wove an organic connection between the Jewish national redemption and the universal redemption of humanity. This is why the prophets demand that the people of Israel be an exceptional one. The prophet Isaiah, who denounced his people with the ferocity of one bound by the truth, who prophesied the extirpation of tyranny and evil in the world and the elevation of every man, spoke these words: "And I will visit evil on the universe and their iniquities on the wicked, and I will eliminate the conceit of the wicked and humble the pride of tyrants. I will cherish humans more than gold, and man more than the splendor of the finest gold." (Isaiah 13:12) Isaiah believed in the grand destiny of his people, saying in the name of his God: "I, the Lord, have called you in justice, and I will hold your hand, and make you into a covenantal people, into a light unto the nations." (Isaiah 42:6)

These two motifs, the vision of redemption and the concept of an exceptional people, appear repeatedly in biblical literature and the Apocrypha, in the Mishna and in midrash, in the liturgy and in Hebrew poetry. And three hundred years ago, in his *Tractacus Theologico-Politicus*, Benedict Spinoza—the greatest philosopher of Israel, who seemingly distanced himself from the Jewish people after he was ostracized and excommunicated by his Amsterdam community, and who openly repudiated the religious tradition, laying the foundation for biblical criticism based on logic and

reason—voiced his absolute confidence that the day would come when “the Jewish people would once again set up their state, and God would choose them anew.” In other words, upon renewing its independent sovereignty the people of Israel would again be a chosen people, an extraordinary people who showed the world the way. Moses Hess and Theodor Herzl, the nineteenth-century visionaries of the Jewish state, also believed that the reborn State of Israel would be an exemplary nation.

To mark the state’s special purpose in the history of the people from the present time forward, we need to understand two developments that radically changed the face of the Jewish people during the first half of this century, before the establishment of the state. At the beginning of the twentieth century there were ten-and-a-half million Jews in the world. More than eighty percent of them—8,673,000—were concentrated in Europe. Less than ten percent of the Jewish people then lived in America: About a million in the United States, and some 50,000 in other parts of the New World. Approximately 700,000 Jews lived in Asia and Africa, and 55,000 in the Land of Israel.

By the beginning of the Second World War, the Jewish people numbered sixteen-and-a-half million, and although in the meantime millions of Jews had migrated to countries overseas, the great majority of the people, close to nine million, were still concentrated in Europe. For three hundred years European Judaism, particularly that of Eastern Europe, had been the mother of Jewish existence: It was there that the centers of Tora learning were found, there that the movements for emancipation were established, there that the Haskala movement and the new Hebrew and Yiddish literature arose, and Jewish academic scholarship flourished. It was also where the modern Lovers of Zion and the Jewish workers’ movement came into existence. When Dr. Theodor Herzl, the creator of the Zionist movement, brought about the First Zionist Congress at the end of the nineteenth century, European Judaism was the stronghold and bulwark of the Zionist movement.

Within the Zionist movement one can discern ancient sources, sources almost as old as the people itself. These sources are connected with the saga

of the first Hebrew, whose name God changed from Abram to Abraham, saying, "I have given to you and to your descendants after you the land of your dwelling, the entire land of Canaan as a permanent possession." (Genesis 17:8) Neither Herzl nor Hess nor even Spinoza invented the idea of a Jewish state. For hundreds of years, Jews prayed the following words thrice daily: "Sound the great shofar for our freedom; lift up the banner to bring our exiles together, and assemble us from the four corners of the earth, and may our eyes behold thy return in mercy to Zion."

Until the French Revolution and the onset of the Emancipation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, all Jews knew their dwelling places to be only a temporary exile. The idea that they were part of the people among whom they lived never even occurred to them. This sense of foreignness persisted among East European Jews: The Jews of Russia, Poland, Romania and the Balkans were always aware that they were a minority people transplanted into a foreign land. The revolutionary events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—the nationalist and socialist movements, the national revival movements which spurred some European peoples towards unification and independence (in Italy, Germany, Poland and the Balkans), the awakening of the working class to fight for a new social order, the wholesale migration overseas from European lands—all of these blazed a trail for the Jewish vision of redemption. The Jews began to hold their heads high, with increasing awareness of their value and their standing. There arose a belief in the Jew's ability to revolt against his fate, to move time forward and hasten the redemption through direct action. Among the best and brightest of our people, principally among the young, there emerged the phenomenon we call pioneering—a creative act which channels all of one's powers toward realizing the vision of redemption and independence. At first this creative, revolutionary faith was the prerogative of individuals only. Gradually it educated tens and hundreds, and later thousands and tens of thousands. The pioneer movement turned the love of Zion and the Zionist movement into historic agents.

The pioneer movement which arose during the 1870s and 1880s through the building of Mikveh Israel, Petah Tikva, Rishon L'tzion, Zichron

Ya'akov, Rosh Pina, and all that came after them, laid the groundwork for establishing the State of Israel.

Yet in the twenty-seven years from the end of the First World War to the end of the Second, Judaism in Europe experienced two horrifying tragedies: The severing of Russian Jewry from world Jewry at the end of World War I by the communist regime in Russia; and the murder of six million European Jews during World War II, who were annihilated by the Nazi executioners. This is the double catastrophe—unparalleled even in the tormented history of our people—that was visited upon us during the first half of this century, before the creation of the state.

The founding of the State of Israel in 1948 opened a new chapter, not only in the history of the land, but also in the history of Judaism as a whole. It afforded the Jewish person dignity in his own right; in the space of a few years it redeemed hundreds of thousands of Jews from wretched existence in ruined places of exile, transforming them into proud, productive Jews, the builders and defenders of the land. It breathed new hope into the mute, fettered Jewry of the Soviet bloc. It brought to light the extraordinary practical talents of the Jew in his homeland, in all realms of human creativity and military valor. And, not surprisingly, all sectors of the Jewish people in the diaspora, whether they called themselves Zionists or non-Zionists, “pious” or “free,” welcomed the establishment of the state with love and exultation. From this time forward, the State of Israel became the mainstay of the unity of Jewry in exile.

On this festive occasion, I will not dwell upon the political and economic problems of Israel, yet it is my duty to point out its internal problems and its connection to world Jewry. I will say only a few words regarding Israel's fateful political problem, the problem of security. The resolution of this problem is to be found not just in organizing a first-rate army—and no one will suspect me of underestimating the importance of the IDF. But the existence, prosperity and security of the State of Israel can be guaranteed by one thing only: Massive immigration. The country depends upon its security being bolstered by the addition of hundreds of thousands, of millions of Jews in the near future.

The State of Israel has two central objectives, articulated in the Declaration of Independence in the form of special laws. Although they are not called Basic Laws, they are in my eyes the supreme laws of the State of Israel. So long as these laws have not been fully implemented, the work of the state is not complete.

The first is the Law of Return, which embodies the objective of the Ingathering of the Exiles. This law stipulates that it is not the state that confers upon a Jew the right to settle in the land: Rather, this right is his inherently by virtue of his Jewishness, if only he wishes to participate in settling the land.

In Israel proper no preference is accorded Jewish citizens over Arab citizens or other non-Jewish citizens. The Declaration of Independence affirms that “The State of Israel will maintain complete equality of social and political rights for all its citizens, without regard to religion, race or sex.” In the Declaration, however, the Jews’ right to return to the land is deemed to have preceded the founding of the state. The source of this right is the historic bond, never broken, between the Jews and their ancient land. The Law of Return is the law of the enduring historical connection between our people and the land, and it spells out the political principle under which the State of Israel was brought to life.

The second law stipulates the social direction of the state, and the character with which we want the people in Israel to be endowed. I refer to the Law for Public Education.

The second paragraph of this law stipulates the following: “The aim of public education is to ground the basic education the state provides in Israeli cultural values and scientific achievements; in love of the motherland and fidelity to the State of Israel and the people of Israel; in training in agricultural work and crafts; in settling and improving the land; in aspiring to a society founded on liberty, equality, tolerance, mutual aid and love of humanity.” This law spells out the main contours of our aspiration to be an exceptional people and an exemplary state, and to preserve our perpetual ties with the Jewish people around the world. Our historic goal is a new

society founded on liberty, equality, tolerance, mutual aid and love of humankind—in other words, a society free of exploitation, discrimination, bondage, tyranny, the rule of one man over another, the subjugation of conscience. This law declares our aspiration to foster in Israel a culture built on the eternal values of Judaism, along with the attainments of science.

This law and the Law of Return are still far from being realized. At present they serve only as landmarks for the course our country wants to follow, and must necessarily travel, in order to survive and fulfill its historical purpose.

We cannot boast that the people in Israel now is an exceptional people. Although during the brief period of our independence we have progressed faster, perhaps, than any other country during a similar space of time, our structure of government is still far from enlightened and requires many improvements. Similarly, we cannot yet congratulate ourselves that, with an addition of no more than two million Jews to supplement our population since the establishment of the state, we have completed the Ingathering of the Exiles. Still I will attempt to point out briefly the historical necessity of making this state into an exemplary state, along with the special talents that will enable us to realize this great objective, and the necessity for and chances of bringing about the greatest possible Ingathering of Exiles.

Israel has only one loyal ally in the world: The Jewish people. It is the one country in the world which—unlike the Scandinavian peoples, the English-speaking peoples, the Arab, Catholic and Buddhist peoples—has no kindred in religion, language, origin, culture. We dwell as a solitary people. Our closest neighbors, in geographic, racial and linguistic terms, unfortunately are also our bitterest enemies. Our only loyal ally is the Jewish people.

Only by being an exceptional people, in which every Jew will take pride as a Jew, will we preserve the love of our people and our fidelity to Israel. Our position in the world will be determined not only by our apparent material wealth, or our military valor, but by the moral luster of our mission, our culture and our society. Only in this manner will we acquire the friendship of other peoples. And although there are no few shadows in our

lives at present—among them some very dark shadows—we have cause enough to believe that it is within our power to be an exceptional people. I would point to three forces operating in Israel that clearly indicate the ethical and intellectual talents contained within us: The agricultural settlements; the Israel Defense Forces; and the nation's collection of scientists, scholars, writers and artists who, in relative quantity and absolute quality, are equal to those of any other nation in the world.

The agricultural settlements, the kibbutzim and moshavim, have charted a new course for a society grounded in liberty, equality and cooperative support, the like of which is unknown in any other country in the world, East or West. The Israel Defense Forces as well are not only a reliable and effective security tool, but also an educational framework which elevates man, breaks down ethnic and tribal divisions, and inculcates self-confidence in our youth. And although during our few years of independent sovereignty we have had to devote many first-rate resources to security needs and the absorption of immigrants—and who knows how many more years we will be obligated in these ways—nevertheless in these few years we have succeeded in establishing research and scientific institutions on a level worthy of the most developed of nations.

We must not underestimate the moral difficulties confronting us: The habits of exile, excessive divisiveness, the influence of hack journalism and vulgar fiction from both within the country and without, criminal activity among some immigrants who have not yet assimilated, and the segments of Israel's youth who have been emptied of all spiritual and social sensibility. I am aware that our international position, security and well-being cannot be guaranteed in a day, that achieving economic independence will not be easy, that becoming an exceptional people will require unending effort. Our economic and political conditions are intertwined with our potential for moral and spiritual elevation. Body and spirit are not two distinct spheres. The health of the body and the light of the spirit are mutually interdependent. And we can expect a difficult and protracted struggle on all fronts: Economic, political, social, cultural and ethical. Yet the capacity of the

Jewish people to survive in conditions under which no other people has, the abilities we have discovered within ourselves since the establishment of the state, the complex of interchanges among our hundreds of thousands of immigrants since the founding of the state—these suffice to strengthen our faith that we will act and we will succeed, although this will in no small measure depend upon the attitude, will, course of action, and participation of the diaspora.

This is what we require of the diaspora: (i) That they provide their youth with a Hebrew education—the study of the original biblical texts, the people’s history and Hebrew literature; (ii) that they intensify their personal ties to Israel in every way—through visits, capital investments and sending young people to attend Israeli schools and educational institutions; and (iii) that they deepen their commitment to the vision of Jewish and human redemption that was expressed by the prophets of Israel.

These three endeavors can form a project that will unite Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and secular Jewry, and deepen the connection between the Jews of the diaspora and those in the State of Israel. This will make possible the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy that the people in Israel will be a covenantal people and a light unto the nations—in other words, an exceptional people.