

Ingathering and the Destiny of Israel

Eliezer Schweid

Eliezer Schweid, a professor emeritus of Jewish thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is one of the most prominent contemporary scholars of Jewish philosophy and Zionism. Born in 1929 in Jerusalem, Schweid earned his Ph.D. at the Hebrew University in 1962, and has taught there for the subsequent four decades. In 1994, he was awarded the Israel Prize, the country's highest honor for cultural achievement, for research in Jewish thought. Among his many works are *The Land of Israel: National Home or Land of Destiny?* (1985); *Democracy and Halacha* (1994); *Zionism in a Postmodern Era* (1996); and *The Jewish Experience of Time* (2000).

The following essay was published in Hebrew in 1970, and appears here in English for the first time. In it, Schweid asks whether Zionism, after having transformed the dream of a Jewish state into an economic and military success, is still capable of offering a dynamic vision for the future.

The discussion surrounding the Zionist character of the State of Israel is predicated on the seemingly banal assumption that the Zionist movement alone created the state. But as anyone familiar with the story knows, other factors were surely involved as well, some of which created

the political and economic conditions for Zionism to succeed, while others contributed to the actual building of the country. Anti-Semitism, for example, led more Jews to immigrate to the land of Israel than did organized Zionist education; the interests of certain powers in the Middle East were more of a stimulus to settlement in Israel than the diplomatic agility of Theodor Herzl and Chaim Weizmann; and non-Zionist and even anti-Zionist Jewish movements cooperated politically and economically, and even in the actual establishment of settlements, to build and strengthen the state. There are even those who maintain, with the benefit of hindsight, that were it not for the Balfour Declaration, the Holocaust, the persecution of Jewry in Arab countries, and the support of the Soviet Union at the crucial moment, the State of Israel would never have been founded, and if it had been founded, it would not have been strong enough to withstand the rising tide of Arab enmity.

At the same time, there was no shortage of factors working in the opposite direction. Although anti-Semitism drove some Jews to the land of Israel, the allure of European and American civilization encouraged assimilationist movements on a far greater scale. Some Middle Eastern powers may have found reason to lend their support to Zionism, but their interest was always fleeting and their encouragement unenthusiastic; for the most part, the Zionists had to blaze their own trail in an incessant struggle with avowed enemies and former friends. The persecutions that sparked Jewish migrations did not always bring them to the land of Israel. On the contrary, immigrants streamed to whatever countries seemed to offer the best prospects. In the early twentieth century, Russian Jews flooded into the United States, and even after the establishment of the State of Israel, much of North African Jewry chose to immigrate to France. It was Israel's own institutions, and not simply the impersonal forces of history, that organized the mass *aliya* of Yemenite Jews to Israel in the 1950s.

In other words, some factors not connected to Zionism may have helped to build the State of Israel, but on balance they acted more effectively to prevent it. That the state came into being cannot be attributed to impersonal historical forces. It was the product of will, of an organized Zionist minority that made a conscious choice and fought hard to achieve its aims. It was because of this struggle that Great Britain, through the Balfour Declaration, and the United Nations, through its famous resolution to partition Palestine, acknowledged the Jewish people's right to a national home in its historic homeland. It was because of this struggle that many who had already chosen the path of assimilation came to see themselves as personally bound to the Jewish nation, and that a significant part of Jewish immigration began to turn towards the land of Israel in order to develop it. In this sense, the State of Israel is without question the achievement of the Zionist movement.

This truth found its sharpest expression in the ideology of the early Zionist pioneers. The ideology of the socialist Ber Borochov, although it too relied on "natural forces" acting within the Jewish people, gave the fullest, most precise definition of Zionism as an idealistic, activist movement. True, Borochov believed that the Jewish state would be built by the masses, who, after a process of proletarianization, would eventually arrive at a socialist regime through a gradual process driven by socioeconomic forces. Yet Borochov understood that only the will power of individuals, of pioneers, could steer the masses toward the land of Israel. In this sense, Zionism is an "enterprise," an expression of conscious will, and its structure and behavior reflect its essential nature.

But if this is the case, then our opening assumption—that Israel is in essence the creation of the Zionist movement—is not so banal after all. For beyond the simple historical fact, there is an important principle at stake here, with implications for our own day: The State of Israel is an enterprise, the result of an effort of the will. It is not a "natural" phenomenon, brought into being and sustained by irresistible forces. Israel was

not created by such forces, nor does it continue to exist through their grace. Israel is “super-natural,” a creation of the conscious will, and it can therefore continue to exist only so long as the conscious will that created it persists. That which allowed it to be built determined the dynamics of its development, and sets the conditions under which it can continue.

But if the State of Israel is essentially an enterprise of the will, then we must also assume that its character is the product of free choice. Israel cannot continue to exist unless a choice is made that it continue to be Zionist. This does not mean that its policies must always and consistently be Zionist; any such requirement would clash with Israel’s voluntary, activist nature. In fact, Israel has always had to choose between two kinds of action. With hindsight, we can see that it has not always chosen the path of Zionist policy. In fact, at times it has taken into account temporary political interests that are not fully compatible with Zionist ideals.

Nevertheless, the Jewish state, by virtue of its very establishment, created a set of conditions that impel it to strive towards the Zionist ideal. In other words, a kind of momentum was generated which finds expression in our social, economic, and diplomatic interests, always pushing us towards Zionist policy. For instance, the nearly universal hostility of the Arab states forces the Jewish community in Israel to acknowledge its unbreakable ties to the diaspora and the basic necessity of *aliya*, Jewish immigration to the land of Israel. At the same time, when foreign powers favor the Arab states, their policies often translate into prejudices that are keenly felt by their own Jewish communities, who as a result identify more closely with Israel. These are just two striking examples; there are many more.

On the other hand, many forces today are arrayed against the Zionist vision. With the rapid advances of science and technology, Western societies have become more cosmopolitan, a trend which tends to undercut

national distinctions, and which also has increased the mobility of professionals who may more easily relocate to major industrial and research centers, which offer far greater opportunities for advancement than in small countries. At the same time, efforts toward conciliation between Israel and the Arab states also strengthen the belief that Israel can attain peace and integration into the region only by forgoing Zionist policies. Similarly, the conflicting interests of the great powers in the Middle East do little to encourage Zionist policy; even those powers dedicated to Israel's survival would still like to see its power limited. Here special attention should be given to the plight of Soviet Jewry. Even if the Soviet leadership were to come to the conclusion that the only solution is the mass emigration of these Jews, such a policy would never be considered, for it would anger the Arab leadership. The gist of all this is that even with the establishment of Israel, the forces hostile to the realization of the Zionist vision continue to work against the fulfillment of that vision. And even today, these forces outweigh the countervailing forces that favor Zionism.

Looking back, we can see that in the two decades between Israel's gaining independence in 1948 and the Six Day War in 1967, there began in Israel a process of disassociation from the Zionist ideal and its burdens. This process threatened the State of Israel, and with it the whole Jewish people, with the danger of dissolution. And though many Israelis sensed this danger, the state never ruled out the possibility of adopting non-Zionist policies. A country may choose a path that leads to its own destruction.

Understanding the nature of Zionist policy means first of all understanding the voluntary, activist nature of the State of Israel. As long as it is Zionist, Israel, unlike other countries of the world, must view itself as the state of a people whose majority lives outside its borders. It bears responsibility for the safety, well-being, unity, and uninterrupted

cultural identity of the Jewish people, and it must rely on the loyalty of this people—even if the scope of its sovereignty does not remotely match the burden of its duties. Needless to say, Israel’s situation is complex, full of conflicting interests and theoretical and practical challenges. But it must be stated, and emphatically, that the situation will remain viable only so long as relations between Israeli institutions and those of diaspora Jewry, and between Israeli and diaspora communities, remain strong and friendly. For as long as the Jews of the diaspora view themselves as a wellspring from which the Jewish state may continue to be built, as long as they view Israel as a vital source for their own flourishing, and as long as the Jews of Israel accept the diaspora as a source of support and inspiration, then the connection between the state and the Jewish people will hold. The moment this dynamic ceases, Israeli-diaspora relations will fall apart of their own accord. And the strengthening or severing of ties will have had nothing to do with impersonal forces of nature. Rather, it will depend entirely on our free choice, one that must be constantly renewed.

This, I think, is Zionist policy in a nutshell. But it is worth pointing out some of its practical implications. First, Zionist policy expresses itself most practically in attracting and absorbing immigrants, since a Zionist country is one whose political, economic, social, and cultural character depends on immigration. *Aliya* is the centerpiece of Zionist policy. This is particularly important considering that the early Zionist prediction—that the diaspora faced a clear choice between immigration and assimilation—failed to come to pass in any decisive manner. After the establishment of Israel, most Jews chose to stay in the diaspora indefinitely, because they were either unable or unwilling to relocate. But many of those who remain in the diaspora are still faithful to their Jewish identity, even if only in part, and could well hold onto it for several more generations. This means that the Jewish people will not be concentrated entirely in the land of Israel at any point in the foreseeable future.

For precisely this reason, Israel as a Zionist state must focus on immigrant absorption, so that the arrival of Jews will not be an oddity but a

continuous and permanent fact of life—one that will embody the dynamic of Israel-diaspora relations and be the medium through which diaspora Jewry participates in building up the state, and through which the state supports the diaspora. If *aliya* is a fixture of Jewish life, even only in small numbers, then immigration will forge a tangible bond, a living link, among all parts of the Jewish world. It will ensure that Israel may continue truly to reflect, in microcosm, the entire Jewish people. This connection, between the diaspora and the Jews of Israel, will bring together relatives, friends, and acquaintances, so that unity and mutual responsibility will not be an abstract ideal, but a constant, conscious experience. Moreover, immigration to Israel will serve as a clear focus for Jewish education and Jewish social and cultural activity, because it will itself be seen as a realization of the lessons of Jewish education.

In all these senses, *aliya* is the consummation of the basic relationship between Israel and the diaspora. Israel must, therefore, prepare itself accordingly. Its part in this effort must be to encourage education for immigration and stand ready to absorb new immigrants. Of course, this means a willingness not merely to receive immigrants but also to attract them; it means ordering the economy and the patterns of its social life, especially in education, with the purpose of absorbing immigrants in a creative manner. It goes without saying that keeping prepared will affect all spheres of life in the country. In this way Israel can give the lie to the argument that Zionist idealism is something for immigrants only, while native Israelis do their part merely by continuing to live in Israel. In fact, the native-born Israeli who is genuinely a Zionist ascribes special value to his living in Israel and not elsewhere, and expresses his idealism by helping to attract and absorb new immigrants.

Second, Zionist policy must foster Israel's Jewish identity, both in its institutions and throughout the population. In terms of foreign policy, this means that under no circumstances may Israel agree to any proposed resolution of its conflict with the Arabs that would threaten its Jewish majority or undermine Jewish sovereignty. Moreover, the State of Israel,

while it contains national minorities whose democratic rights it must uphold, must nonetheless define itself as a Jewish state, a state that expresses Jewish nationhood and serves the national interest of the Jewish people. As for domestic policy, Israel must educate its next generation in the cultural heritage of the Jewish people, encourage ties to the Jewish people as a whole, past and present, and give voice to its Jewish nature in legislation and on the level of symbols.

Third, Zionist policy finds expression in the state's ongoing concern for the welfare of persecuted Jewish communities in the diaspora, and its willingness to take every possible measure to prevent or alleviate the suffering of these communities. The government must make every decision, in both foreign and domestic policy, not only according to the country's short-term interest, but also according to the impact it has on the lives of diaspora Jews and their relations with Israel.

And finally, a Zionist policy is one that reflects Israel's character as an ongoing enterprise. That is to say, if Israel is truly faithful to its mission, it will not view its achievements as a finished product. It will see them, rather, as a means toward a mission that is, for the most part, unfinished. This is not mere rhetoric, or even a plea for consciousness-raising. I am referring to the basic orientation of Israeli society and of the individuals who constitute it—in short, to the everyday life of ordinary Israelis. A state responsible solely for its own citizens can permit itself to set goals like raising the standard of living within the context of what is called the “welfare state.” But a state responsible for a people scattered all over the globe cannot afford to limit its aims in this way. It is directed not toward the present, but toward the future. The importance of such an orientation, with its cultural and educational implications, cannot be underestimated in the social life of a country.

There can be no doubt that adopting a Zionist policy means taking on heavy obligations. It will only sharpen external conflicts (between Israel and the Arabs, between Israel and those powers that support the Arabs) as well as internal ones (among various sectors of the Jewish people), and it will require sacrifice on the part of both the state and individual citizens. Why, then, must Israel choose this path? Why should we not rest content with what has already been achieved, and remain where we are? These are not idle questions; they are asked with urgency both at home and abroad. The outside world frequently claims that Israel's insistence on absorbing immigrants and its intense ties with the diaspora give it the appearance of a colonialist "bridgehead." Is not the meaning of a Zionist state the aspiration to expand ceaselessly, to dispossess another people of their homeland for the benefit of a European-American population? Does this not justify the Arab claims that Israel seeks only conquest, and that it threatens Arab nationhood in its entirety? And if so, does it not follow that if Israel relinquished its Zionist policies, the Arabs would then acknowledge that the Jewish population dwells in Israel by right, and might even concede the Jews' right to national self-determination? At times we hear such arguments from Arab statesmen, usually as a diplomatic ploy, but at times with sincerity. And Jewish intellectuals echo them, as in Uri Avneri's *Israel Without Zionism*.

But within Israel another question is raised, in all its seriousness, although usually indirectly: How long can the State of Israel withstand the terrible stress of a war for survival? Is the price in bloodshed worth paying? Would it not be better to give up on our national, spiritual, and cultural uniqueness, if this means a perpetual binding of Isaac, each generation sacrificing its sons on the altar of Zionism? Would it not be better to make peace, even at the price of assimilation, and save the lives of individuals at the cost of our life as a people? It is in the nature of things

that such questions are not asked aloud. They are muttered, even whispered. Indeed, no thinking person is so strong-willed as never to contemplate such desperate thoughts. We therefore must confront them, with a clear head.

Why should Israel continue to act as a Zionist state? The answer is simple: Because it has not yet fulfilled its purpose. The State of Israel was established in order to solve the problems of Jewish existence, and these problems have not yet been solved. A portion of the Jewish people (in the Soviet Union, in the Communist bloc, and in the Arab countries) lives under the threat of persecution, if not annihilation. Another portion (in the Western countries) faces the danger of assimilation and the cessation of its unique cultural creativity. Our people as a whole stands at risk of dissolution into independent centers of Jewish life. The State of Israel alone can save the communities that live in fear of physical destruction, and it alone can focus the loyalty of Jews tempted by assimilation. And Israel's ability to address the problems of Jewish existence depends on its continuing its Zionist policy. If *aliya* were to cease and the organizational, economic, and cultural ties between Israel and the diaspora were to unravel, Israel would no longer have any role to play in the life of the Jewish people, and, from this perspective at least, it would be as though it had never been.

Are Israel and its citizens responsible for the entire Jewish people? Absolutely. First, because Israel was not established solely through the efforts of those who lived in Palestine. Generations of Jews from around the world put their bodies and souls into it. When they understood that it was a solution to the problems of their entire beleaguered people, they pooled the resources of all segments of world Jewry in order to build it. If the state were to deny its overarching national commitment, it would mean no less than a betrayal of the Jewish people's deepest trust. Second, Israel exists for the sole purpose of taking responsibility for the entire people, and only this justifies both its ongoing support for the diaspora and the very presence of a Jewish population in the land of Israel. It is

commonly argued that the past does not obligate people in the present. But the pioneers who immigrated from the diaspora and built their homes in the land of Israel came in order to solve the problems of the Jewish people. In the meantime, they gave birth to children, whose right to dwell here is a function of their having been born here. This is their natural homeland, and since they differ both from the Arabs and from the Jews of the diaspora, they are entitled to the political rights of a separate “national entity.” This is, on the face of it, a reasonable argument.

But beyond the obvious problem with this argument, that the population of Israel far more resembles an “ingathering of exiles” than an indigenous people, we must also take a closer look at the nature of this Israeli “national entity.” On what can it base its desire to distinguish itself from its surroundings? How can it justify itself against the Palestinian Arabs’ claim that they have a prior national right to this land, that it is their homeland? Only two responses are possible. One is that the uniqueness of Israeli nationhood lies in its higher European culture. This answer, however, only confirms the claim that Israel is a foreign European “colony,” the last child of Western imperialism, and that its existence is therefore a crying injustice against the Arabs of the country. A second is that Israel’s uniqueness resides in its own particular culture, whose source is the linguistic, literary, historical, and philosophical heritage of Judaism. However, one who stakes Israel’s independence on Jewish uniqueness forfeits his right to decline responsibility for the people as a whole. That is to say, any accession to the frequently made demand of moderate Arab leaders, that the bond between the Jewish state and the Jewish people be dissolved, would then justify the Arabs’ argument that Israel is nothing more than a bridgehead for Western colonialism.

Finally, commitment to the Jewish people is something that follows from the Israeli Jew’s obligation to be true to himself. For by denying his people, he rejects his national identity, and corrupts all his cultural and moral associations. I do not mean to suggest that such a denial is impossible. With hindsight, we can identify a process of assimilation that the

Jewish community in the land of Israel underwent, and is still undergoing, no less than its brethren in the diaspora, although in a different way and with different results. The minority that advocates abandoning Zionist policy is, in effect, an expression of this process, the true extent of which is greater than it seems. Nevertheless, “Israeli” assimilation means nothing less than giving up on the existence of the state—if not immediately, then in the not-too-distant future.

Thus, the tables are turned: Israel must undertake a Zionist policy not only for the sake of the Jewish people, but for its own sake as well. Otherwise, it will sooner or later come to an end, if not by military destruction, then by economic, social, and cultural degeneration. It is no exaggeration to say that the choice between a Zionist policy and its rejection is the choice between the existence of Israel and its ruin. As we noted, national destruction is always a path that can be chosen. And one who chooses such a path is still better off knowing where he is going.

How would Israel’s renunciation of Zionism lead to its destruction? In the absence of any justification for its existence, the country would lose its moral resistance against external pressures. But moral strength is the basis of physical strength. Israel did not come into the world and endure till now without understanding the importance of its own existence, the urgency of its mission, and the justness of its goals. Israel cannot go on, not even for a short time, if its citizens lack this moral certitude.

Those who propose that Israel sever its ties with the diaspora assume that in return for this concession, the Arabs will make peace. They also assume that at that point Israel will no longer need a connection to the Jewish people. These assumptions are questionable, at the very least on a pragmatic level. The Arab leaders believe in the Jewish uniqueness of the State of Israel more than do those Israelis who are anti-Zionists. And they will not be willing to come to terms with it, even in exchange for Israel’s renunciation of Zionism. The most they are willing to do is bide their

time, waiting for Israel to fall. But even without military intervention by its enemies, Israel will not last long without a connection to the Jewish people as a whole. It will deteriorate rapidly and in the end disintegrate.

In theory, of course, we could imagine Israel preserving its unique character as an island of developed Western culture, and its achievements might even have an impact on its neighbors. In theory, it could also be imagined that the Israeli population would fend off the demographic competition solely through its inner fortitude.

But it takes no small amount of delusion to rely on these theories. Israel's connections with the West, both political and cultural, derive from its special ties with Jews who are tapped into the major centers of Western culture. With these bonds broken, the West would no longer have any interest in taking a tiny Middle Eastern country under its wing. On the contrary, the best scientific minds that had come together in Israel would be drawn away to the research centers of America and Europe. First, the country would become a spiritual ghetto; afterwards it would drop sharply to the cultural level of its surroundings. There is no reason to believe that under these conditions the Israeli population could withstand the demographic competition that it would necessarily face. The Arab majority would inundate it, first culturally, then politically. This is not idle speculation. Certain events in Israeli society in the years between the War of Independence and the Six Day War provide corroborative evidence. Native-born Israelis, who presumably regarded the country as their "natural homeland," had no great difficulty leaving it in search of success on distant continents. The demographic pressure increased, and the danger that the Jewish state would gradually become part of the Levant was palpable. Only the renewed Zionist consciousness among Israeli Jews after the Six Day War stemmed the tide.

The choice, therefore, is not between developing and intensifying Israel's Jewish character, or keeping Israel stable and content with what it has already achieved. Rather, it is between immigration and development on the one hand, and emigration and decay on the other. The moderate

Arab leaders and the moderate opponents of Zionism in the West understand this. They envision the destruction of Israel by peaceful means. If the Arabs were to accept the existence of Israel once it has renounced Zionism, this would be a wise tactic. Before long, emigration would render Israel too weak to oppose the demographic domination of the Arabs, and in the end Israel would disappear. Through peaceful means, the Arabs would achieve what they had not managed to attain by strength of arms.

In conclusion, we must understand that Israel is a voluntary undertaking, an enterprise of the will, and it can continue to exist only as such. Impersonal forces of nature will not sustain it. If we want it, we must choose to develop it; and if we want to develop it, we must accept its unique Zionist mission: To be the state of the entire Jewish people.