

## Miracle on the Sea of Galilee

Almost two years of terror and bloodshed in the Jewish state have led to political and cultural changes whose full significance is only now coming to light. Most commentators have focused mainly on the military and diplomatic fronts: The collapse of the Oslo accords and the disintegration of the PA, the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe, the strengthening of the American-Israeli alliance. On the domestic front, observers have tended to dwell on the marked shift of the electorate towards the political Right, as poll after poll shows voters flocking to parties that initially opposed Oslo and warned of its dangers. Yet the most significant change has been cultural, and its impact might be more important than any of the more widely reported effects: Zionism, the belief in the need for a state that acts to advance the interests of the Jewish people, is making a comeback.

In response to growing hostility from without, coupled with the radicalization of Israel's own Arab population—many of whose leaders now reject the legitimacy of a Jewish state and openly identify with the Palestinian struggle—the cultural and intellectual elite that had been sympathetic to one or another element of post-nationalism in the past two decades has begun embracing the principles that have been the foundations of Zionism since Herzl wrote *The Jewish State* over a century ago. This trend extends to the most basic questions of political identity: In the

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past two years, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has modified the code of ethics that it had adopted in 1994, and has made “love of the land” and loyalty to the State of Israel, “the national home of the Jewish people,” into one of its three guiding principles. The Education Ministry has begun encouraging the display of Zionist symbols, such as the national flag, in Israeli schools, and has begun revising its approach to teaching Jewish history, even going as far as withdrawing a history textbook on the twentieth century that failed to present the basics of Zionism and cast doubt on the justice of Israel’s cause in the Six Day War.

Perhaps the most vivid expression of the cultural change is the emergence of a group called the Committee for National Responsibility, convened by the Yitzhak Rabin Center for Israel Studies in Tel Aviv. Sixty prominent Jewish writers, scholars, officers, journalists, and public activists, representing a range of political views from the Zionist Left and Right, have been meeting since February 2001 with the aim of identifying the unifying principles most Jewish Israelis share. The group was founded by Israel Harel, a central figure of the settlement movement in Judea and Samaria, and is now headed by Maj.-Gen. Uzi Dayan, Israel’s national security adviser. Its roster includes political theorist Yael Tamir, who was Ehud Barak’s absorption minister and now heads the Rabin Center; senior *Ha’aretz* journalist Ari Shavit, a past chairman of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel; historian Alex Jakobson of the Hebrew University, who was a longtime activist in Peace Now and the Meretz party; Bnei Brak Mayor Mordechai Karelitz, a close adviser to some of the leading haredi rabbis in Israel; R. Uri Regev, the leader of the Reform movement in Israel and the country’s best-known advocate of equality for all branches of Judaism; Brig.-Gen. (res.) Effie Eitam, a leader of the religious Right who recently became the head of the National Religious Party and a minister in the Sharon government; as well as Yoram Hazony, president of the Jerusalem-based Shalem Center (which publishes AZURE).

In July of 2001, eight of the group’s members, including Shavit, Jakobson, Tamir, Karelitz, and Hazony, closeted themselves in a hotel in

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Tiberias on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (known in Hebrew as Lake Kineret) and hammered out a document that gave voice to their shared views, and which quickly became a focus of broad popular agreement surrounding the purposes of the State of Israel. The result of their efforts, which they called the Kineret Declaration, was subsequently ratified by the members of the full committee in October 2001. Its ten sections, the product of extended negotiations, offer statements of principle affirming the essential values of Israeli society: Israel is the national home of the Jewish people. Israel is a democracy. Israel is a Jewish state, maintaining a formal connection with the diaspora and with Jewish history and religion. Israel respects the civil rights of all citizens, Jews and non-Jews alike. Israel is committed to peaceful relations with its neighbors.

None of these represent a major departure from the beliefs of classical Zionism. But it has been a long time since these principles were presented as part of a unified position, reflecting a broad consensus of opinion in the Jewish state. Over the past generation, each of these principles has become a rallying cry for different groups seeking to alter the country's cultural and legal makeup by arguing that these values are fundamentally irreconcilable, that a full-blown conflict between Israel's "Jewish" and "democratic" sides is unavoidable. "There is no contradiction between Israel's character as a Jewish state and its character as a democracy," the declaration asserts in response. "The existence of a Jewish state does not contravene democratic values, nor does it in any way infringe on the principle of freedom or the principle of civil equality."

Moreover, the democracy to which the signatories have committed themselves is a robust one, as is articulated at length in three of the declaration's articles. The authors affirm the individual's "freedom of religion and conscience, language, education, and culture," and give their full support to the idea that Israel provides "full equality of rights for all its citizens, without distinction of religion, origin, or gender"—a statement that is particularly important in time of war, when democratic freedoms can most easily be curtailed.

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**B**ut the most significant element of the Kineret Declaration is its unequivocal stand on the Jewish character of the State of Israel. The agreement's first, third, and ninth articles cover this topic, adopting a tone that has been rare in the public discourse. "We believe that it is out of supreme and existential necessity, and with complete moral justification," the authors write, "that the Jewish people should have a national home of its own, the State of Israel.... The right of the Jewish people to lead a life of sovereignty in the land of Israel is an enduring and unquestionable right." Similarly, "The Jewish character of Israel is expressed in a profound commitment to Jewish history and Jewish culture... [and] in strengthening the Jewish diaspora and deepening its relations with it." Not content with general statements of principle, however, the authors present a list of specific ways in which this commitment finds expression:

The Jewish character of Israel is expressed in a profound commitment to Jewish history and Jewish culture; in the state's connection to the Jews of the diaspora, the Law of Return, and its efforts to encourage *aliya* and absorption; in the Hebrew language, the principal language of the state, and the unique language of a unique Israeli creativity; in the festivals and official days of rest of the state, its symbols, and its anthem; in Hebrew culture with its Jewish roots, and in the state institutions devoted to its advancement; and in the Jewish educational system, whose purpose is to inculcate, along with general and scientific knowledge and the values of humanity, and along with loyalty to the state and love of the land of Israel and its vistas, the student's attachment to the Jewish people, the Jewish heritage, and the book of books.

Such statements have been relegated in recent years to the status of outdated, reactionary, and repressive sloganeering—particularly in the face of the universalist, "myth-smashing" tendency that has overtaken much of academic discourse and has been deftly translated for use in the public

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arena. By reaffirming these beliefs, the Kineret Declaration has placed them back at the heart of the Israeli debate, reducing their opponents to a marginal status commensurate with their numbers in Israeli society.

Indeed, since its publication, an impressive array of high-profile Israelis have endorsed the Kineret Declaration, including several hundred political, cultural, and intellectual figures from across the ideological spectrum. These include first-rank academic figures such as legal scholar Ruth Gavison, political theorist Shlomo Avineri, ethicist Asa Kasher, and scholar of Jewish thought Aviezer Ravitzky; political leaders such as President Moshe Katsav, Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert, Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai, and Haifa Mayor Amram Mitzna; high-ranking military officers including the incoming IDF chief of staff, Maj.-Gen. Moshe Ya'alon; and cultural icons such as songwriter Naomi Shemer, poet Dalia Rabikovitch, novelist Aharon Meged, and popular singer-songwriter Aviv Gefen.

This widespread support testifies to an awareness among Israelis of the importance of the document as a symbol of Jewish unity. “The Kineret Declaration is a tremendous achievement,” wrote Ben-Dror Yemini, a journalist for *Ma'ariv* who was one of the agreement's original signatories, “because it represents the raising of a common banner among the majority, who are fed up with the anti-Zionist, anti-Jewish, and anti-democratic worldview” that has been over-represented in Israeli public debate.

Predictably, the Kineret Declaration has met with vocal opposition from various quarters. Shulamit Aloni, a founder of Meretz and a longtime advocate of turning Israel into a secular-universalist state, called it a “worthless piece of paper,” dismissing it as a shallow imitation of the nation's Declaration of Independence. Journalist Avirama Golan, in a column in the daily *Ha'aretz*, called it “a great laundering of words” which, by excluding representatives of Israel's Arab community, “obscures the commitment to citizenship in favor of ethnic commitments”—a challenge to the legitimacy of an internal Jewish dialogue. The haredi

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newspaper *Yated Ne'eman*, which tends to represent the views of the more isolationist line in that community, called the Kineret Declaration an effort “to bring about conciliation between good and evil,” adding that this sort of dialogue between religious and secular Jews “absolutely goes against everything we have received from the great rabbis who have passed on the tradition in recent generations.”

These objections are hardly surprising. For decades, the public arena in Israel has been dominated by vocal attempts of the extremes to negate the achievements of the country’s cultural and political center. The mainstream of Israeli Jews, who believe that Israel can and ought to be a Jewish state, and never saw any contradiction between this and a democratic form of government, have often been largely left out of this debate. Viewed in this context, two major achievements may be counted in the Kineret Declaration’s favor, whose impact in both Israel and the diaspora may be far-reaching.

First, the Kineret Declaration is a sharp rebuttal to the widespread belief that Israel’s Jews are too divided to agree on fundamental issues. That a cross-section of prominent opinion leaders have now done so is significant—and doubly so because of the role this myth has played in preventing the emergence of an effective constitution for Israel. The process which led to the agreement is much like what would be needed to create a workable constitution, and in many respects can be seen as a kind of dress rehearsal for such a process. Given the sense of unity that becomes more palpable in Israel with each passing day, the idea of adopting a constitution through negotiations among the major groups seems far more realistic once a document such as the Kineret Declaration has been successfully negotiated.

Yet beyond the prospects for creating a constitution for Israel, the declaration also has achieved something important for the country’s Jewish identity. By deliberately forging an internal Jewish document, the forum has reintroduced the idea that the State of Israel is not merely another democratic republic on the shores of the Mediterranean, but is a

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project of the Jewish people seeking to chart its own course among the nations. “We are one people,” declare the authors, echoing Herzl. “We share one past and one destiny. Despite disagreements and differences of worldview among us, all of us are committed to the continuity of Jewish life, to the continuity of the Jewish people, and to vouchsafing the future of the State of Israel.” The Kineret Declaration represents, above all, a rejection of the idea that a new “Israeli” people has superseded the Jewish identity, a belief that has captured the imagination of a number of prominent Israeli thinkers on the Left and Right since before statehood.

This collective Jewish voice has not been heard in Israel for a generation. It was, of course, the dominant voice when the state was founded half a century ago, and the authors of the Kineret Declaration are correct in invoking the “spirit of Israel’s Declaration of Independence” in the document’s preamble. But this voice receded over the last few decades, drowned out by the noise of Israeli factionalism. By issuing a call in the name of “we, Jewish citizens of Israel,” the Committee for National Responsibility has indeed placed national interests above lesser political concerns, and has revived the idea of a Jewish people acting in history.

This is no small achievement, and even if it is to serve only as a call for a Jewish nation facing its most trying hour in recent memory, it will have set a valuable precedent. In so doing, the drafters and signatories of the Kineret Declaration have taken a small step toward fulfilling Zionism’s most daring aim, as set out in the Declaration of Independence: To affirm “the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign state.”

David Hazony, for the Editors  
May 15, 2002

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## APPENDIX: THE KINERET DECLARATION

Out of a commitment to the State of Israel as a Jewish-democratic state, and out of a sense of responsibility and profound concern for the future of Israel and for the character of Israeli society, we, Jewish citizens of Israel, have assembled and have, in the spirit of Israel's Declaration of Independence, adopted the following agreement:

### *I. The State of Israel Is the National Home of the Jewish People.*

For more than one thousand eight hundred years, the Jewish people was without a home. In countless lands and historical circumstances, we experienced persecution. In the twentieth century, under conditions of exile, the Jewish people sustained a historic catastrophe such as no other people has known, the Holocaust.

We believe that it is out of supreme and existential necessity, and with complete moral justification, that the Jewish people should have a national home of its own, the State of Israel.

Throughout its history, the Jewish people maintained a profound and unbroken connection to its land. The longing for the land of Israel and for Jerusalem stood at the center of its spiritual, cultural, and national life. The Jewish people's adherence to its heritage, its Tora, its language, and its land is a human and historic occurrence with few parallels in the history of nations. It was this loyalty that gave rise to the Zionist movement, brought about the ingathering of our people once more into its land, and led to the founding of the State of Israel and the establishment of Jerusalem as its capital.

We affirm that the right of the Jewish people to lead a life of sovereignty in the land of Israel is an enduring and unquestionable right. The



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State of Israel fulfills in the land of Israel the Jewish people's right to life, sovereignty, and freedom.

The State of Israel is the national home of the Jewish people, the sanctuary of its spirit, and the foundation stone of its freedom.

## ***II. The State of Israel Is a Democracy.***

In accordance with its Declaration of Independence, the State of Israel is founded on the principles of freedom, justice, and peace. The State of Israel is committed to full equality of rights for all its citizens, without distinction of religion, origin, or gender. The State of Israel is committed to freedom of religion and conscience, language, education, and culture.

In accordance with its Basic Laws and fundamental values, the State of Israel believes in the dignity of man and his freedom, and is committed to the defense of human rights and civil rights. All men are created in God's image.

Every citizen of Israel, man or woman, is equal to all others. All citizens of Israel are free individuals.

The State of Israel is a democracy, accepting the decisions of the majority, and honoring the rights of the minority. All citizens of Israel are full and equal partners in determining its character and its direction.

## ***III. The State of Israel Is a Jewish State.***

Inasmuch as it is a Jewish state, Israel is the fulfillment of the right of the Jewish people to self-determination. By force of its values, the State of Israel is committed to the continuity of the Jewish people and its right to an independent life in its own sovereign state.

The Jewish character of Israel is expressed in a profound commitment to Jewish history and Jewish culture; in the state's connection to the Jews of the diaspora, the Law of Return, and its efforts to encourage *aliya* and

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absorption; in the Hebrew language, the principal language of the state, and the language of a unique Israeli creativity; in the festivals and official days of rest of the state, its symbols, and its anthem; in Hebrew culture with its Jewish roots, and in the state institutions devoted to its advancement; and in the Jewish educational system, whose purpose is to inculcate, along with general and scientific knowledge and the values of humanity, and along with loyalty to the state and love of the land of Israel and its vistas, the student's attachment to the Jewish people, the Jewish heritage, and the book of books.

The State of Israel has an existential interest in strengthening the Jewish diaspora and deepening its relations with it. The State of Israel will assist Jewish education in all places in the world, and will come to the aid of Jews suffering distress for their Jewishness. The Jews of Israel and the Jews of the diaspora are responsible for one another's welfare.

#### ***IV. The State of Israel Is a Jewish-Democratic State.***

By force of the historic right of the Jewish people, and in accordance with the resolutions of the United Nations, the State of Israel is a Jewish state. In accordance with the basic principles on which it was established, the State of Israel is a democracy. There is no contradiction between Israel's character as a Jewish state and its character as a democracy. The existence of a Jewish state does not contravene democratic values, nor does it in any way infringe on the principle of freedom or the principle of civil equality.

In order to guarantee the continuity of a Jewish-democratic Israel, it is imperative that a substantial Jewish majority continue to be maintained within the state. This majority will be maintained only by moral means.

It is incumbent upon the State of Israel to give expression to the sense of closeness felt by Jews towards the members of every other national or religious group that sees itself as a full partner in the upbuilding of the state and in its defense.

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***V. The State of Israel Respects the Rights  
of the Arab Minority.***

The State of Israel is obligated to treat all of its citizens equally and impartially.

In areas in which Israeli citizens who are not Jews suffer from injustice and neglect, vigorous and immediate action is called for in order to bring about the fulfillment of the principle of civil equality in practice.

Israel will ensure the right of the Arab minority to maintain its linguistic, cultural, and national identity.

Jewish history and Jewish tradition have taught us the terrible consequences of discrimination against minorities. Israel cannot ignore these lessons. The Jewish character of the State of Israel will not serve as an excuse for discrimination between one citizen and another.

***VI. The State of Israel Is Committed  
to the Pursuit of Peace.***

From the day of its birth, Israel has been subject to conflict and bloodshed. In all the years of its existence, it has had to live with struggle, grief, and loss. Nevertheless, in all these years of conflict, Israel did not lose its belief in peace, its hope of attaining peace.

With that, Israel reserves the right to defend itself. It is imperative that this right be safeguarded, and that Israel maintain the ability to defend itself on a permanent basis.

The State of Israel is aware of the tragic character of the conflict in which it is involved. Israel wishes to bring an end to the conflict and to assuage the suffering of all its victims. Israel extends a hand to its neighbors, and seeks to establish a lasting peace in the Middle East.

Israel is prepared, therefore, to recognize the legitimate rights of the neighboring Palestinian people, on condition that it recognize the legitimate rights of the Jewish people. Israel has no wish to rule over another

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people, but it insists that no people and no state try to bring about its destruction as a Jewish state. Israel sees the principle of self-determination and its expression within the framework of national states, as well as a readiness for compromise on the part of both sides, as the basis for the resolution of the conflict.

### ***VII. The State of Israel Is Home to Many Communities.***

In the State of Israel, the tribes of Israel have gathered from many lands, and, together with the inhabitants of the land, Jews and non-Jews, have created in it a society of many aspects.

Israel's human and cultural mosaic is rich and unique. Out of an appreciation for the contribution of the variety of different communities to the founding and establishment of the state, and out of respect for each distinct culture and for each individual, it is incumbent upon Israel to cultivate and preserve the palette of traditions that exists within it.

It is imperative that Israel preserve a common cultural core, on the one hand, and cultural and communal freedom, on the other. Israel must create a tolerant human environment that will allow each identity group to bring out the best within itself, and permit all of these groups to live together in harmony and mutual respect.

### ***VIII. The State of Israel Is a State of Fraternal Solidarity.***

In keeping with the dreams of its founders, Israel aspires to build and maintain a society committed to the pursuit of justice. Nevertheless, the years since Israel's founding have seen the entrenchment of severe social distresses in the country. We believe that there is a vital need to renew the spirit of Israeli brotherhood on a basis of equality of opportunity and social justice. Israel must heal the internal schisms that divide it and create a true partnership among its citizens.

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Israel must be a state of mutual responsibility. It is imperative that the State of Israel be a moral society, sensitive to the hopes of the individuals and communities within it. Ours must be a society that offers all its citizens a sense of partnership. Every individual in Israel deserves the opportunity to develop the abilities and potentialities within him. The allocation of public resources should afford every citizen the maximal possibilities to develop his talents and improve his life, without regard to his place of residence, origin, or gender.

To achieve this, it is imperative that Israel invest more intensively in education and infrastructure in the communities of its periphery. Israel must be a country in which one can pursue the good life.

### ***IX. The State of Israel and the Jewish Religion.***

Israel is home to secular, traditional, and religious Jews. The growing alienation of these groups from one another is dangerous and destructive. We, secular, traditional, and religious Jews, each recognize the contribution of the others to the physical and spiritual existence of the Jewish people. We believe that the Jewish tradition has an important place in the public sphere and in the public aspects of the life of the state, but that the state must not impose religious norms on the private life of the individual. Disagreements over matters of religion and state should be resolved through discussion, without insult and incitement, by legal and democratic means, and out of a respect for one's neighbor.

We are one people. We share one past and one destiny. Despite disagreements and differences of worldview among us, all of us are committed to the continuity of Jewish life, to the continuity of the Jewish people, and to vouchsafing the future of the State of Israel.

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## *X. National Responsibility.*

In establishing the State of Israel, the founders of the state performed an extraordinary historic deed. This deed has not ended; it is at its height. The return to Zion and the effort to found a Jewish-democratic sovereignty in the land of Israel stand, in the twenty-first century, before great challenges.

We, who have joined together in this agreement, see ourselves as responsible for carrying on this deed. We see the State of Israel as our shared home. In accepting upon ourselves this agreement, we pledge to undertake all that can and must be done to guarantee the existence, strength, and moral character of this home.