
Natan Sharansky

In Israel, one is seemingly catapulted from crisis to crisis, with few opportunities for reflection. However, our jubilee year gives us a rare chance to think about how far we have come, and where we are heading. Yet instead of praising past achievements and focusing our sights on a hopeful future, many of us seem to be mired in cynicism and marred by a pessimism that casts a pall over the very future of the Jewish state. Indeed, at a time when we should be celebrating the miraculous birth of the Jewish state and its flourishing over the last fifty years, we are instead conveying to the world an image of a country with no direction, little vision, and an uncertain future.

For many, the constant media reports of pitched battles between dove and hawk, secular and religious, Ashkenazic and Sephardic, veteran Israelis and new immigrants, suggest that Israeli society is tearing at the seams. But the “sound and fury” of our daily lives masks the far more profound changes taking place. While the arena of change is diverse, its direction is clear. In many ways, Israel embodies the same exceptionalism that has marked the Jewish people since our birth over three thousand years ago. The unique character of our people is continually defying any attempts to cloak it in “normalcy.”

The founders of the State of Israel saw in the emerging nation-state the opportunity to make the Jewish people a “normal” nation. But the last fifty years of statehood have taught us a valuable lesson: The more “normal” our nation is, the less appeal it has to Jews everywhere, both in Israel and in the diaspora; on the other hand, the more exceptional we allow Israel to become, the more powerful the idea of the Jewish state will be, in the eyes of all of our people.

This renewed exceptionalism is perhaps most easily observed in the transformation of the Israeli economy. For much of our first fifty years, we were a highly centralized society, governed according to the dictates of

socialist ideology. The founders of Israel saw the economy as a fertile front in their battle for “normalcy.” For them, this necessitated total economic self-sufficiency—we would be a nation that would produce and do everything, regardless of how ill-suited we were for the task.

While this philosophy dominated the era of state-building, it could not withstand the assault of our exceptionalism. Planned normalcy is rapidly giving way to an environment far more suitable to the unique talents of the Jewish people, the creative dynamism of the marketplace. The collectivist utopian ideal is being swept away by the forces of globalization, bringing tremendous wealth and opportunity in their wake. Today, Israel is a superpower of the brain industry, an international center of software production, with more high-tech start-ups per capita than any country in the world—and second in absolute terms only to the United States—and we are just beginning to tap into the vast reservoir of talent in our highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce.

Parallel to these economic changes is the change in outlook toward the development of Israeli society. Here too, we are slowly embracing the exceptionalism of our heritage and moving away from the cookie-cutter approach to nation-building. The dominant ethic of the state’s founders operated on the assumption that the aspiration of normalcy demanded the creation of a “new” Jewish people. Immigrants to the promised land would quickly shed their cultural and religious baggage and sacrifice their heritage and traditions for the sake of a uniform identity. This all-encompassing, melting-pot approach, while arguably essential for the creation and maintenance of the fledgling state, also resulted in widespread resentment—a resentment whose repercussions are still rippling through Israeli society today.

In the last decade, new immigrants from the former Soviet Union have come to a country where the image of the melting pot is slowly being replaced with that of the mosaic—a mosaic of cultures and traditions where each individual need not sacrifice his identity for the sake of an all-consuming ideology. Here too, Israel is slowly learning to appreciate the uniqueness of its citizens.

The political party which I head, Yisra'el Ba'aliya, highlights this sea change in political philosophy. Fifty years ago, a party representing the interests of new immigrants would have aroused far more opposition than it does today. In a political spectrum no longer dominated by one party, we have witnessed the flourishing of smaller parties, making the Knesset perhaps the world's most representative legislature. While multi-party government presents its own challenges to effective administration, it no doubt also reflects the exceptional nature of a country where each voter sees himself as prime minister.

Yet despite these elements which encourage Israeli exceptionalism, pessimism abounds. We are told that the idea of the Jewish state has lost its luster, for both Israeli and diaspora Jewry. But those who hold these views fail to appreciate fully the historic changes taking shape. Internally, the economic, social and political changes we are experiencing are forcing Israelis to reassess their own identities—a reassessment that can lead to a stronger Jewish identity as we rediscover what makes our people truly exceptional.

As for the diaspora, the centrality of Israel to Jewish life can and should be renewed. For generations, Jews prayed for the ingathering of the exiles and dreamed of “next year in Jerusalem.” But the creation of the state “normalized” this exceptional and magical idea. The changes taking place can once again recast the notion of Aliya—an ascendancy to a better way of life—in its proper role. In our first fifty years, Israel served as a shelter from oppression, absorbing Jews fleeing persecution around the globe. In the next fifty we can become a beacon of opportunity, appealing to Jews of the West seeking not only a high standard of living, but also a meaningful quality of life. Such a state would address the needs of both Jews physically separated from their ancestral homeland, as well as those who feel spiritually detached from their people.

The challenge for Israel in the next fifty years will be to unleash the individual talents of its citizens, while preserving the common bond that unites all of us. Each nation, if it is to survive, must have a glue that binds it together. For some it is history, for others language, and for others a creed.

Our strongest glue is our Judaism, whether it be understood as a nationality, a faith, an awareness of anti-Semitism or a response to anti-Semitism. But no matter how we relate to our Judaism, one thing is clear: If the idea of the Jewish state is to flourish, we must allow our nation to be exceptional. For the more our state constrains an exceptional people in the straitjacket of “normalcy,” the less it will inspire our youth or sustain our old.

This year, Israel and I both turned fifty. But while a man may be old at fifty, a nation is still young. Just as the young rejuvenates the old, an Israel struggling with its adolescence energizes me. For many, adolescence is a time of cynicism and uncertainty, when we question the assumptions of our youth and fear the challenges of our future. For others, it is a time of hope and self-awareness, where we begin to appreciate what makes us unique, and eagerly and confidently await the chance to show our mettle. For me, Israel must take the latter view, and that will make all the difference.

Natan Sharansky is Minister of Industry and Trade of the State of Israel.