
Uzi Baram

Over the next fifty years, Israel should focus on three major challenges: Developing an Israeli identity, the continued struggle for a stable peace with its neighbors, and the firm establishment of democratic values in the country.

The first, and perhaps central, problem that Israel will have to face in the next fifty years is the crisis in Israeli identity. The younger generation may reject the newly evolving Israeli state and society; social alienation may increase and lead to the dissolution of society; or, alternatively, the public may succeed in creating a unique system of values that will reinforce both Jewish roots and identification within the state.

In the period of early Zionism and the establishment of the state, the Israeli secular public was dedicated to settling the land, the kibbutz movement and mutual assistance. As time passed, however, this ethos disappeared. As a result, Israel today faces a clear and present danger: In the absence of a unified system of values, life in the Land of Israel may lose its meaning.

Yet Haredi society, to cite one example, has always maintained a distinct religious ethos. In recent years, religious Zionists, to cite another, have produced their own national-religious value system. Moreover, the Reform and Conservative religious movements have developed Jewish values and symbols of their own to unite their members. Only secular Israeli society lacks a clear, defined system of values. And, unfortunately, the Reform and Conservative Jews have not expanded their influence in Israel in a way that could impart meaning to the Jewishness of the country's secular citizens. Furthermore, religious extremism and waves of newly observant Jews contribute to a rise in the level of alienation in Israeli society; as a result, the secular public is increasingly distancing itself from Judaism.

As a result, I am concerned for the future of the non-Orthodox public in Israel. I have a strong connection to religion. I belong to the generation that dreamed of a Jewish state and saw its establishment and survival as heroic. I was raised in a household where we went to synagogue on holidays; my friends include rabbis and religious figures.

In recent years, much of the younger generation, which grew up with the State of Israel as an established fact, has shown an unwillingness to contribute to the state, and a downright apathy when asked to sacrifice for the sake of Israel's continued survival. Even among those who do endanger their lives by serving in the army, many feel that the end of their army service signals the fulfillment of their obligations to their country, and from now on it is their country which owes something to them.

In the midst of this crisis, preventing the decline of Israeli society requires formulating a secular definition of Judaism. We need to encourage more creativity in Hebrew by developing a humanistic Hebrew education of greater significance to secular Jews. Furthermore, we should initiate great public projects, such as establishing an Israeli authority similar—in terms of its originality, vision and realization—to the original Tennessee Valley Authority.

The second major problem is the future of peace and security in Israel. Even a peace-loving person such as myself cannot say with certainty that we will live the next fifty years in peace with our enemies, as the Bible declares: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb." On the other hand, I envision no serious threats to our survival in the near future: Neither full peace with all the Arab states, nor the war of Gog and Magog. Instead, we will probably face years of wars and peace agreements that may be violated, ties with Arab states and changes in Israel.

In Israel, we live with constant fear. Part of the public fears a second Auschwitz; the rest fear the Arab fundamentalism that threatens Israel's survival. Such existential threats will diminish only with the establishment of an ideal peace. Unfortunately, attaining such a utopian peace is hardly plausible, due to the historical enmity between Israel and the Arabs, and

because different elements—both Jewish and Arab—are uninterested in coexistence. We should therefore adopt an approach that combines the hope for peace with a degree of caution and prudence. The Middle East will not remain static; inaction, in the sense of failing to adjust to changing circumstances, will endanger our security. Shimon Peres embodies this kind of nuanced approach: Without his vision, the nuclear project in Dimona would never have been built, and the balance of power between Israel and the Arab states would not be as it is today. We cannot know whether peace may lead to our region's becoming a nuclear-free zone.

Only a stable peace between Israel and the Arabs will ensure Israel's survival in the long run. If Israel is forced to contend with additional wars, but the public feels no hope for peace, there is a danger that the country will be emptied of its citizens. We must, therefore, strive actively for peace. Peace will allow Israel to flourish; all our abilities will reach full expression. Israel will likely become a social, educational, academic, economic and scientific powerhouse.

One possible side effect that a full peace with our neighbors may generate is the danger that ties with Arab states and great waves of Arab tourists will encourage intermingling and assimilation. It may reasonably be assumed, however, that religious elements—both Jewish and Arab—will attempt to prevent this tendency.

The third important problem with which Israel will have to grapple is Israeli democracy. In my estimation, the democratic form of government will be put to the test in coming years, not only in Israel, but in many other countries throughout the world. Unfortunately, unlike Israel, not every nation views the existence of a strong democracy as being of supreme importance. Developed societies maintain democracy at present, but worldwide economic and political problems, such as food shortages, may lead to the rise of non-democratic regimes.

Aside from the issue of the continuation of democracy in Israel, there is the question of the degree to which civil rights are protected. The Declaration of Independence defines the State of Israel as a Jewish state that ensures

complete equality of rights to all its inhabitants, irrespective of religion, race or sex. In principle, this definition is right and correct; in practice, however, discrimination against women and minorities still occurs. Israel certainly has room for improvement in this area.

My concern with the treatment of women and minorities notwithstanding, I believe that the idea that Israel should be a state of all its citizens, and not a Jewish nation-state, poses an existential threat. This point of view, supported by extreme Arab elements and post-Zionist Jewish schools of thought, poses a real threat to the future of the State of Israel. For the next half-century, rather than embracing post-Zionism, Israel should strive to be a Jewish state that grants full rights to minorities.

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